

Review of *Red at the Bone*

De'Ashia Terrell

Jacqueline Woodson is a critically acclaimed author and the recipient of numerous awards including the Coretta Scott King Award and the Newbery Honor. In her most recent novel, *Red at the Bone*, the intergenerational relationship between two families is explored as they come to terms with an unplanned pregnancy, familial dynamics, and the concept of class structure as it relates to upbringing and a sense of identity. Melody, somewhat of a miracle child, unites through her birth, two fifteen-year-olds —Iris and Aubrey, who are still children themselves and completely unaware of what would lie ahead of them after Melody's birth. Aubrey and Iris's parents are less than thrilled about their new grandchild, especially Iris's mother, but they grow to learn that the birth of a child means a chance to rediscover the joy children can bring and the necessary change that would otherwise be lost. The novel takes place in Brooklyn in 2001 and recounts the events that led to the unification of two families.

As the novel opens, a sixteen-year-old named Melody, the daughter of Iris and Aubrey, descends a staircase to her birthday party. Intersecting events such as social class and racial identity have led to her friends and family being here, but one thing is for certain, none of these people expected to come together to celebrate a child they each had to grow to love (and some were more inclined to that love than others). Although they both love their daughter in their own way, it is clear for Melody's parents that raising a child is not an easy task but it is rewarding in a way that binds for eternity.

The novel's point of view alternates between five characters; each of them adding another layer of intrigue and clarity to the overarching story. Through Melody's perspective,

there is a longing to connect with her mother, the woman who carried her for nine months but who could not be bothered to stick around and bond with her. As far as Melody is concerned, Iris is a woman who carries the title of “mother,” but she is not a mother, not a mama. Even as a child, Melody “already knew what *Mama* meant. How and where mamas were supposed to be” (89). But as Melody grows older, she realizes that perhaps she also has a duty to her mother which is to teach her that family transcends time and sometimes it is all one has.

Iris's point of view carries most of the novel through her journey as a pregnant fifteen-year-old with few options and later a college student who feels like nothing and no one can stop her from achieving great feats. Iris struggles with identity, as well as what motherhood should mean to her at any given moment in her life.

Aubrey, Melody's father, faces the same issues, but he is much more gracious of accepting his role as a father, which confuses Iris and also causes her to view him with disdain. For Aubrey, Melody and Iris are his only family. Aubrey's perspective is one of the most compelling yet heartbreaking because he was yearning for a sense of family that was shattered when Iris realized she could never love him in a way that would be fulfilling for him. In the end, Melody was all that Aubrey had left and to him, it had to be more than enough.

Sabe and Po'Boy give the story roots in order to keep Melody, Iris, and Aubrey grounded with their old-school insight, wisdom, and guidance. Sabe and Po'Boy are Iris's parents and they come from a time when Black people were terrorized and made to live in fear so that they would never have the opportunity to set their children up to inherit generational wealth. At the heart of the novel, Sabe and Po'Boy teach a much-needed history lesson. They prove that history must be remembered and shared. They insist that identity is knowing where one's people come from and what they've been through, and they show that identity is also carrying past sacrifices to decide

how best to keep a family moving forward.

In a novel that deals with the intricacies of family ties, Woodson reinforces the idea that family, love, and belonging go hand in hand. Even at times when the novel falls short of developing the relationship between Melody and Iris or further explaining the healing that needed to occur between Iris and Sabe, there is still an essence of setting expectations and shattering the precedents that once acted as barriers. Iris is expected to be a mother and deal with all of the responsibilities that it encompasses. She mothers Melody in the best way she can, but she soon realizes that college and trying to stay away was a barrier that was keeping her from getting to know the child she fought so hard to keep. Likewise, Sabe expects Iris to follow the “proper” order of life and get married and have a child after she finishes college. However, Sabe soon realizes that having a child is not the end of Iris's life but the beginning of her rebuilding and fostering a relationship with her daughter and granddaughter respectively.

Red at the Bone shows the cyclical pattern of life: one day chicken, next day bone. One day you're alive, the next day you're gone. The novel illustrates Woodson's way of crafting language to read like poetry; it's beautiful to read: familiar and yet difficult to digest at times. The power of memory and remembering is the string that keeps families tied together, and *Red at the Bone* shows us that loved ones may leave but the memories and stories they leave behind allow us to keep their spirit alive. In head and heart, the beauty of life is in remembrance.