

MARLEY DIAS

gets it
DONE

AND SO CAN YOU!

by
MARLEY DIAS

FOUNDER OF
#1000BLACKGIRLBOOKS

Introduction by
Ava DuVernay





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by **MARLEY DIAS**
with Siobhan McGowan

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Herstory

WHO I AM, HOW
THIS ALL BEGAN

1



remains of some prehistoric species . . .

If only, then maybe none of this would have happened. I wouldn't be such a public advocate for black girl books. I wouldn't have had to write this book. I'd just be your typical girl in a New Jersey public school, checking off the titles on her assigned reading list, cramming for tests, playing video games with my best friend, and binge-watching slime and cat videos on YouTube.

Maybe.

But then again, I doubt it.

And that's not what happened anyway.

And I'm not that average girl.

I'm Marley Emerson Dias.

“Use what you have to make the world a better place in your own way.”

—MARLEY DIAS, UNITED STATE OF WOMEN SUMMIT

I'm a teenager. And I'm an activist. For literacy. For diversity. For equity and positive social change. And you can be too! You may think we're too young to have any influence on or make a real difference in this so often messed-up world, but I'm proof we're not. Because I already did it, I'm going to keep on doing it, and so can you. I'll help by telling you how.

But hold up. Wait a minute, Marley, slow down. I'm getting ahead of myself, as usual. Thinking out loud, as fast as I talk (and if you've ever heard me talk, you know). First, let me tell you what *did* happen.



Me and Mom at The Ellen DeGeneres Show.

It all began, as a matter of fact, over a plate of pancakes.

Mmmm, pancakes . . .

THE POWER OF PANCAKES

Pancakes are the definition of awesome, don't you agree? Look it up in the dictionary if you don't believe me. Breakfast in general is the best. My mom thinks so too. We pretty much eat breakfast at all hours of the day. We have breakfast for dinner if we so choose. Sometimes at home, sometimes at diners—New Jersey

being the unofficial diner capital of the world, of course.

So my mom and I were snug in a booth at a diner one Thursday after school. Or maybe it was a Tuesday. And I was eating pancakes, all good. It was November, almost the holidays. We were talking, just about stuff: the year that was coming to an end, the year that was about to begin. My mom, who is brilliant and the coolest and completely crazy—I'm not being a brat, anyone in my family would say the same,



Bestselling authors Jacqueline Woodson (left), me, and Rita Williams-Garcia.

“We are the main characters of our lives.” —MARLEY DIAS

but more on her later—my mom asked me:

“If you could change one thing in the new year, Marley, what would it be?”

Hmmm.

Good question, Mom!

I took a long moment to consider it, hand-cupping-chin-contemplative-smiley-emoji style, and then it came to me.

BLACK GIRL READING

Some background info: Not long before this pancake convo, I had (finally) finished a ridiculously amazing book. A book the likes of which I had never read before. Instead of chapters, there were time periods. Instead of paragraphs, there were poems. Some poems were

three pages long. Others were four lines short. But they all were super descriptive, bringing to mind everything from the glow of fireflies in summer, to the cryptic graffiti scribbled on city buildings, to that nervous-excited feeling you get on the first day of first grade—I mean everything, really. The story was autobiographical. And the main character—the protagonist—was a black girl. A black girl like me. Except she had grown up in the 1960s and ’70s, during the civil rights movement, in Brooklyn and the Jim Crow South.



My titi—that’s a Spanish word for “auntie”—my titi Eva had given me the book *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson as a birthday gift when I was nine years old. In my family, we give books as gifts all the time. To be honest, I am a tbn: total book nerd. I devour them—flipping through their pages as fast as I think and talk. But *Brown Girl Dreaming* was different. At nine, I just didn’t get it. At all. The poetry. The lack of the usual plot. All that pretty imagery—what did it mean? For the first time ever, I set a book aside. Put it back on the shelf in my bedroom. When my aunt asked me, a whole year later, how I’d liked it, I



had to admit to her that—shocker in the DiasCrew—I hadn’t read it; it was too hard to understand.

“Maybe,” she challenged me gently, “you should try again.”

(Can you tell by now that all the women in my family are completely boss?)

Anyway, I did try again, and with the benefit of age, patience, and maturity, ha-ha, suddenly Jacqueline Woodson’s story-in-verse made complete sense to me. No, it more than made sense; it opened a whole new world to me. A world where modern black girls were the



Mom is always by my side.

“[Marley] is my dream twenty-first-century person, in terms of realizing something needs to be changed and making it happen.” –JACQUELINE WOODSON

main characters—not invisible, not just the sidekick. A world where black girls were free to be complicated, honest, human; to have adventures and emotions unique just to them. A world where black girls’ stories truly mattered. And it was *beautiful*.

Because that was not exactly the world I was experiencing in real life, back in fifth grade. In my class—in all the fifth-grade classes—we were required to read “classics”: books like *Shiloh*, which is about a white boy and the dog he rescues. And *Old Yeller*, which is about a white boy and the dog that rescues him. And *Where the Red Fern Grows*, which is about a white boy and the *two* dogs he

trains. These were all good stories. Not to be disrespectful about any white people, dogs, or any of those books, or their authors—and I know lots of kids love books like those—but I mean, seriously! One of them had been awarded the Newbery Honor and another the Newbery Medal. But so had many black authors. It’s like winning an Oscar for your book; if you win it, you are basically officially one of the best authors on the planet. We could have had other options. What about *Brown Girl Dreaming* and *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia?

There were students of all different races and ethnicities in my class. Just not in the books we were



assigned to read. And no black authors had written any book on our reading lists.

Which brings me back to the diner. And that question my mom posed over pancakes, about what I would change if I could. I gulped down a mouthful of fluffy, yummy, flapjacky goodness, then answered her.

“I’d make it so that kids in my class, in my grade—that kids

being included, of our stories not being told.” And I was. “I am *sooo* sick and tired of reading books about white boys and their dogs!”

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred D. Taylor won the 1977 Newbery Medal. It had been around a long time like those other books. Why wasn’t it considered a classic? *Brown Girl Dreaming* has also won a Newbery Honor Medal, the Coretta Scott King Award,

“I don’t look up to any specific person. I find qualities in people that I admire. No one is perfect and I don’t think saying that I aspire to be one person is the best idea because it puts pressure on you to have [a] specific goal.” —MARLEY DIAS, BLAVITY.COM

everywhere—could read books with black girls as the main characters,” I said. “Books like *Brown Girl Dreaming*. I’m tired of us not

the NAACP Image Award, and the National Book Award. *One Crazy Summer* has also won most of these awards, too. That’s like



sweeping the Oscars in every category. Why wasn't it considered a classic too? Why wasn't it mandatory reading?

My mom gave me a look across the table. That way she does when she's going to drop some truth.

"Well," she replied, "that's an interesting dilemma, Marley. What are you going to do about it?"

I repeat: Good question, Mom!

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

I didn't know it at the time—I was just articulating my own

personal frustration—but I had run smack up against an issue that affects millions of students, both in America and around the world. I would later learn that fewer than 10 percent of children's books published in 2015 featured a black person as the main character. And that's a problem. Frankly, it's unfair.

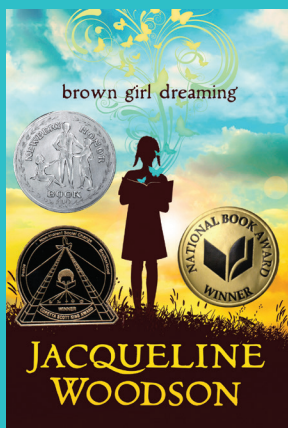
Don't get me wrong: I was already reading books with black girl protagonists. At home. But the only books we'd read at school were slave narratives set in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

or stories with stressed-out girls from the civil rights movement. While these stories are extremely important because they portray the strength and resilience of black girls throughout history, they can get depressing and disappointing when it's all that schools offer. The range of black girl experiences is so much broader, and deeper, and richer than that!

There's an expression: "How can you be it if you can't see it?" Meaning, if the examples of black characters—black astronauts and fashion designers and forensic archaeologists and tech entrepreneurs and ballet dancers and movie directors and presidents of

the United States—don't exist in fiction or in the movies or on TV, then how would we even know it was a possibility, an option, to be any of those things ourselves?

I understand that logic, I do. And it may be true for many people, although I myself don't 100 percent accept it. I believe in the power of our imagination and intelligence to create something where there was nothing before, to manifest it, with the encouragement of our family and our community, and with inspiration from whoever's come before. That's what creativity, and originality are all about. After all, there hadn't been a black president before Barack



BROWN GIRL DREAMING, by Jacqueline Woodson, changed my life. It was the first book that ever challenged me as a reader—I had to put it down and not pick it up again for a whole year before it really made sense to me. The experience of going from not understanding to understanding taught me that time can solve a lot of problems. It taught me patience. It even humbled me a bit!

“Seeing a story on a page about a black child written by a black author . . . legitimizes your own existence in the world, because you’re a part of something else. ‘Look, I’m here in this book.’” –JACQUELINE WOODSON

Obama. There had been civil rights leaders and senators and professors, but not a president. Until—boom!—Barack Obama happened, and then there was. (And with Barack came Michelle Obama, the one and only black first lady, and Sasha and Malia, the first African American president’s children.) Now these barriers can never be unbroken. In other words, there has to be a first, a pioneer, to set the example. A person who envisions the possibilities even when she can’t literally see them, and who then goes on to embody them. Yay!

If representation isn’t an absolute necessity, though, that doesn’t mean it’s not majorly important. Or deserved. Or that it doesn’t make a difference. Lots of books offer important lessons about how to deal with complicated issues. But if the characters don’t reflect you, if you can’t relate to them, it can be more difficult to absorb the morals of the stories. They may make less of an impact and leave less of an imprint on your heart, mind, and soul. You’ll close the covers of the book, with its lessons still buried.

Not every girl is lucky enough

to be raised in a smart, supportive family and community like I've been. Those girls especially need the power of example in the books they read, because they may not see it anywhere else in their world. Without representation, they risk losing their sense of identity—if they ever even had it in the first place.

Sad.

Beyond sad.

Wrong.

Plus, to get basic about it:

How can educators expect kids to love, instead of dread, reading when they never see themselves in the stories they're forced to read? Since most kids have to go to school, being in class every day can be a way to give kids hope—or the opposite, if a teacher or school doesn't see that all kinds of books and experiences are important. If there are no black girl books as part of the school curriculum, then how are we expected to believe all that stuff that teachers





and parents are constantly telling us about how we're "all equal"? If we're all equal, then we should all be represented equally. If black girls' stories are missing, then the implication is that they don't matter. I didn't like it so I had to do something.

A HASHTAG IS BORN

But what was I going to do? Fortunately, thanks in part to my involvement in GrassROOTS Community Foundation's girls'

camp, which teaches confidence and social activism (more on that later too), I had a few thoughts on the subject. Over pancakes and juice that afternoon, I came up with an idea: I would collect books, of course. Lots of them. I would get donations of not 100, not 500, but, because it seemed like an appropriately huge number, 1,000 books featuring black girls as the main characters. I'd get 1,000 books, and I'd give them away wherever they were

needed most, and soon everybody would be reading about awesome us.

My goal was to do this by February—and it was November.

How I was going to do it, I had no idea. Where were the books going to come from? Not a clue. All I knew was that this—the importance of including black girl voices—was my truth. My passion. I had to make it happen. Somehow. Even if it had never been done before.

A hashtag.

That was the way to start.

A hashtag, because if there's one thing I'd learned from watching slime and cat videos on YouTube, social media is powerful.

It is also, however, full of tons of cyber junk that almost nobody ever sees. And, if you're a kid, there are risks involved in using social media. It has to be done responsibly and should always involve the guidance of your parents (check



out Chapter 5 for some super-important info on social media dos and don'ts).

My biggest challenge in going viral was to come up with something fun, catchy. Unforgettable.

Yes! A hashtag was born.

#1000BlackGirlBooks

My mom posted the hashtag first and her friends also used it, because at that time I did not have my own social media account.

As for what happened next and how I started a movement, well, read on.