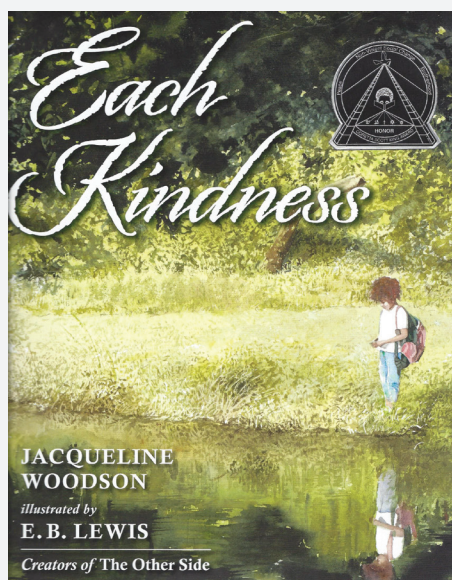


First Opinion: Experiencing Empathy through Jacqueline Woodson's *Each Kindness*

Woodson, Jacqueline. *Each Kindness*. Illustrated
by E. B. Lewis, Nancy Paulsen Books, 2012.

Christina U. King and Angie Zapata



Jacqueline Woodson's *Each Kindness* is a poignant book for readers of all ages. In pictures and in words, this award-winning picture book offers a socially just message for readers to ponder, much in the way of *Aesop's Fables*. Told in first person narrative, Woodson presents a moral lesson about the importance of showing kindness and having empathy for others. E. B. Lewis complements the artfully written text with stunning illustrations that illuminate the narrative with the snow-covered landscape of northern America. Through his use of somber watercolor and white-washed hues, Lewis evokes feelings of caring and compassion in his depictions of the school, the classroom, and students.

Readers will find it easy to imagine themselves as students in the classroom when Maya, the new girl, arrives. Maya is different from her peers. She plays with older toys and she wears hand-me-down clothing. When readers first meet Maya, they see her head turned downward, possibly in contemplation of what awaits her in this new school and from her classmates, to whom she whispers "hello."

Readers experience unkindness toward Maya through Chloe's eyes as she ignores and dismisses her. What starts as students withholding their friendship and shunning Maya quickly

changes to blatant bullying. Yet even in the face of rejection and persecution from others, Maya remains steadfast and demonstrates kindness. Each of Maya's ever kind gestures or attempts to develop a friendship—showing her jacks and a tiny red ball she'd gotten for her birthday, a deck of cards, some pick up sticks, and a small tattered doll—result in an impasse. "Whenever she asked us to play, we said no" (unpaged).

Maya's attempts to befriend Chloe and the other children quickly end when Maya quits trying to reach out and disappears altogether. Chloe notices that Maya's seat is empty and soon realizes that she is gone. The final images of Maya are of a soft-hued, sweet girl, jumping, jumping, jumping around the whole school yard, seemingly oblivious and impervious to all of the hurt and unkindness aimed her way. With Maya's abrupt departure, readers are positioned to negotiate the scene from her perspective and wonder what it would be like to have no friends.

Woodson then presents Ms. Albert, the teacher, with a big bowl of water. "We all gathered around her desk and watched her drop a small stone into it" (unpaged). Lewis is careful to illustrate a portion of each of their faces surrounding the small stone as reflections in the water. The ripples from the stone appear to wash over them in a synchronous manner.

"This is what kindness does," Ms. Albert said. "Each little thing we do goes out, like a ripple, into the world" (unpaged). But they had not been kind. They had shown quite the opposite to Maya. What, then, had they sent out into the world?

This question would resonate with Chloe. She could think of nothing kind about her behavior toward Maya. Lewis's depiction of Maya holding the small stone in her hand and examining it with a contemplative look captures the tension she feels—how could such a small stone weigh so much? Chloe feels the absence of any acts of kindness as Ms. Albert gently explains, "Even small things count." Chloe is remorseful and feels terrible about how she treated Maya. She promises to smile back if given another chance.

The story closes with Chloe never having the chance to make things right with Maya. She reflects, "I watched the water ripple as the sun set through the maples and the chance of a kindness with Maya became more and more forever gone" (unpaged). The moral of the story reminds readers to be mindful of one's actions toward others, no matter their race, socioeconomic status, or any observed "difference." Our actions, like the stone, may be small, but the consequences of our actions, like the ripples, may be great and far-reaching.

About the Authors

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