



Teacher Companion Guide

Harbor Me

By Jacqueline Woodson

Note about this guide

This book club teacher guide is centered around Jacqueline Woodson's book, *Harbor Me*. This guide offers a short summary of each chapter and suggested discussion questions to accompany the student journal prompts. In addition, we have provided extension activities for potential deeper learning.

Note about the book

This book tells a story about a diverse group of children whose teacher lets them have a weekly hour of kids-only sharing time, which the book's narrator, Haley, captures on a voice recorder. What the six kids discuss is real, honest, and often difficult. The book includes discussion of sensitive topics that may be triggering for some students, including racism, parental incarceration, immigration and deportation, abandonment, and bullying. We suggest teachers provide time and space for students to reflect on these topics.

Materials:

- Teacher Guide (this document)
 - [Before Reading](#): Author Bio
 - Chapter summaries, discussion questions, & extension activities
 - [Chapters 1-7](#)
 - [Chapters 8-13](#)
 - [Chapters 14-20](#)
 - [Chapters 21-26](#)
 - [Chapters 27-32](#)
 - [Chapters 33-40](#)
- [Student Journal](#)
 - Student journal prompts for each chapter grouping (sections include 3 chapters each)
 - Each entry contains an analysis prompt, creative/reflective prompt, vocabulary tracker, and additional prompts.

Before Reading

Questions to begin the book club

- What do you think of the cover of the book? What do you think this story will be about?
 - Suggest that students can read the book to see who has correctly predicted (or come close) the book's plot just by looking at the cover.
- "Where do you feel safe?"
 - Give everyone who wants to contribute the chance to share. Then tell the group that a special safe place is at the center of the action of the book. Encourage students to read the book to see if their safe place resembles the space these six students share.

Brief Bio of Jacqueline Woodson

(Taken from <https://jacquelinewoodson.com>)

I wrote on everything and everywhere. I remember my uncle catching me writing my name in graffiti on the side of a building. (It was not pretty for me when my mother found out.) I wrote on paper bags and my shoes and denim binders. I chalked stories across sidewalks and penciled tiny tales in notebook margins. I loved and still love watching words flower into sentences and sentences blossom into stories.

I also told a lot of stories as a child. Not "Once upon a time" stories but basically, outright lies. I loved lying and getting away with it! There was something about telling the lie-story and seeing your friends' eyes grow wide with wonder. Of course I got in trouble for lying but I didn't stop until fifth grade.

That year, I wrote a story and my teacher said "This is really good." Before that I had written a poem about Martin Luther King that was, I guess, so good no one believed I wrote it. After lots of brouhaha, it was believed finally that I had indeed penned the poem which went on to win me a Scrabble game and local acclaim. So by the time the story rolled around and the words "This is really good" came out of the otherwise down-turned lips of my fifth-grade teacher, I was well on my way to understanding that a lie on the page was a whole different animal — one that won you prizes and got surly teachers to smile. A lie on the page meant lots of independent time to create your stories and the freedom to sit hunched over the pages of your notebook without people thinking you were strange.

Lots and lots of books later, I am still surprised when I walk into a bookstore and see my name on a book or when the phone rings and someone on the other end is telling me I've just won an award. Sometimes, when I'm sitting at my desk for long hours and nothing's coming to me, I remember my fifth-grade teacher, the way her eyes lit up when she said "This is really good." The way, I — the skinny girl in the back of the classroom who was always getting into trouble for talking or missed homework assignments — sat up a little straighter, folded my hands on the desks, smiled, and began to believe in me.

Chapters 1-7

Summary	It is the summer before Haley, the narrator, begins seventh grade and she is thinking back to the previous school year, listening to an audio recording of her and her classmates. She reflects on being put into a class for special kids—kids that weren't progressing in the general classrooms. In the class, were her best friend, Holly, as well as students named Esteban, Amari, Ashton, and Tiago. Their teacher was Ms. Laverne, a soft-spoken, kind woman that all the students loved. Haley reflects on how the school year started and when Ms. Laverne started their weekly chats. At the beginning of the school year, Esteban came into class and said <i>they've taken his Papi</i>. Nobody knew where or who took his papi, but over the next few weeks the students tried to make Esteban feel better by saying that his papi would come back soon. Haley wanted to support Esteban more by sharing about her own experience with a missing father—her uncle raised her the past eight years while her dad was in prison—but she couldn't find it in herself to share that secret. One day, Ms. Laverne brought the six students to a small room and told them that every Friday, she would give them the last hour of school to go to the room and talk on their own. The students were skeptical, wondering what they would talk about and felt uncomfortable about the situation. This is how their ARTT (A Room To Talk) group got started.
Discussion Questions	• Haley says, “So much can change in a minute, an hour, a year.” Do you agree? Why? • Why do you think Ms. Laverne decided to give her students this time to talk, alone, once a week? What effect would the presence of an adult have had on the conversations? • Why might the children be more comfortable with Ms. Laverne's supervision and structure than without it? • What do you think about the characters so far? (Haley, Holly, Amari, Esteban, Tiago, Ashton, and Ms. Laverne) • Haley talks about the book, <i>A Tree Grows in Brooklyn</i>, (p. 2). What does she say that book is about? She says that Ms. Laverne told the students they were like that tree from the book... why do you think she said this? • Haley's uncle says there's no moral, just a happy ending, to the story he tells her. Do you think there's a moral to the story? Why does he tell her this story? • How do you think Haley's relationship with her uncle will change, once her father has re-entered her life? • Who is the “they” that took Esteban's papi? • Why do you think Haley struggles with saying anything to Esteban?
Possible Extension Activity	Getting to know the author • Watch this short video about the author • Discuss ○ How does Woodson think we can build a better world? ○ Does Woodson think we should protect young people? Why or why not? ○ Why did Woodson become a writer

Chapters 8-13

Summary	Haley receives a recorder from her uncle and starts recording immediately. She tells a story about how Ms. Laverne told her class about the Lenape Indians who inhabited New York before they were killed and forced out. When Haley reflects on the Lenape people she comments how the world is made up of stories on top of stories, never ending. When Ms. Laverne finished her story about the Lenape, she asked the students what they would have done if they were the first settlers in America. She then asks the class whether they would protect them... if they would act as a harbor for someone who needs it. The next day in the ARTT room, Haley asks the rest of the group if she can record them. She explains it would be a way to collect their stories and remember them. They agree to it. Esteban is the first to volunteer to share a story and he talks about his papi. His papi came from the Dominican Republic and had dreams of being a poet or a baseball player, but knew those were nearly impossible. Instead, he worked in a factory to provide for his family and used to remind Esteban how lucky Esteban was to be going to school and getting an education. His papi went to work one day and never came back. Several weeks pass and Esteban shares with the group that his papi is being held in a jail in Florida and might be sent back to the Dominican Republic. If he's sent back, Esteban's mom says they might have to go there, too. After, the group discusses whether America is truly the land of the free. Haley receives a letter from her father and he apologizes for missing their last meeting. She decides she'll forgive him, but not forget. We learn that Haley's mother was Black and her father is white, and she cannot remember her mother.
Discussion Questions	• Why do you think Haley wanted to record the class conversations? Do you think she was considering the memories she's already lost or the ones she wants to hold onto? Both? • Why do you think memories are so important to Haley? • The group discusses ideas about America being the land of the free. What are their opinions? What is your opinion? • At the bottom of page 52 what do you think Amari means when he says, "can't tell anybody anything. We. Are. All. Alone. Now. I guess that means you are free?" What are your impressions of Amari? • What does Ms. Laverne mean when she says that she wants each person to say, "I will harbor you"? • How would you answer Ms. Laverne's questions: If the worst thing in the world happened, would you protect someone else? Would you let yourself be a harbor for someone who needs it? Why?
Possible Extension Activity	Original Inhabitants In the book, we learn that the Lenape Tribe lived in New York before European settlers arrived. • Use a map to see who lived in North America before Europeans arrived. ○ Map 1 ○ Map 2 • Find the area where you live right now. What Native American group lived where you do now?

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continue learning about this tribe. Do an internet search or look them up on the Native Languages of the Americas page for kids. |
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Additional information on the Lenape:

<https://lenapeprograms.info/lenape-delaware-indian-resources/lenape-history/>

Chapters 14-20

Summary	Some weeks later(after Halloween), Amari is the next to speak on the recorder. He talks about his father telling him he can no longer do some things, like play with toy guns in public, because he is Black. His father tells him about a young Black boy who was shot and killed on a playground by police. Amari has trouble communicating why this “talk” from his father made him angry, but Haley steps in to help him. She says it’s unfair–unfair that some (white) boys can play one way, but Amari cannot, simply because of his skin color. Amari looks to Ashton, who is white, and tells him how unfair it is. As the class is wrapping up, Ashton tries to make the argument that it’s not only Black or Latino boys being harmed, that it could be anyone. But the other students chime in with more stories, similar to the boy on the playground. When Ashton tries to speak up again, Amari leaves the room. Holly’s mom picks up Haley and Holly from school (on Friday’s Haley goes to their house so Holly’s mom can help do her hair since her uncle tried, but could never learn how to style her kinky hair). As they’re driving, Haley sees Ashton get bullied by a group of older boys and she wishes she could jump out of the car to go and help him. In mid-November, Ashton speaks to the recorder. He tells the story about when he first met Amari. That Amari asked if he was albino and it was the first time Ashton ever thought about his whiteness. That when Amari then told introduced himself, Ashton felt a something in his chest, like he wasn’t homesick after having moved to a new place. Amari surprises Ashton by saying he remembered the moment, too. We learn that Haley’s mother died when she was three in a car crash. Her uncle finally told her the story of her mother’s death when Haley was six years old and had to visit the ER after being injured on a slide. We also see Haley noticing that Holly might be interested in Amari and she feels a sense of jealousy.
Discussion Questions	● Amari talks about how kids are forced to grow up. Why do you think that happens? Do you think that’s right? Do you think we should change this? ● When do you think the right time to start teaching kids about topics like racism is? ● Why do you think Haley thinks of Ms. Laverne’s question (would you have harbored?) when she looks at Ashton after Amari left? ● How might Ashton’s story of realizing differences in his skin color to others be similar to that of the people of Lepahoking? ● Do you think Ashton should share his story of being bullied with the other kids? ● On page 89, Ashton thinks that if people stop talking about racism, it would just go away. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
Possible Extension Activity	Current Events Find current news stories about any of the themes in the book, such as immigration, police brutality, or bullying (either print and bring articles to students or allow them to search news sources independently). ● Ask students to share their articles with the group and discuss. ○ Do these news stories seem more relevant to you after reading the book? ○ Do you have any personal stories related to these themes that you feel comfortable sharing?

Chapters 21-26

Summary	Ashton shares that he's being bullied to the rest of the group. The others ask who's doing it and where, because they are concerned. Everyone voices that it's not right. Ashton continues talking and shares how he's often felt like an outsider and different from others, but when he moved to this school he felt like he belonged. Holly and the rest of the group remind Ashton that he's one of them, that they all belong together. After school that day, they all walk alongside Ashton when leaving and the bullies don't bother him. In December, Esteban receives a letter from his papi, who's written him a poem. Esteban reads it aloud and for the first time, he smiles. Esteban shares that one day he wants to translate his papi's poems and sell them in both English and Spanish. For a brief chapter, we move to present day Haley, who is in her room listening to the recordings from the last school year. Her father has been home for two months and her uncle is preparing to move out on his own. As she listens to Esteban's she wonders if he and his papi are now walking along a beach together, hinting that Esteban may have gone to live in the Dominican republic. Her uncle walks in and encourages her to go and talk to her father because she hasn't said much to him since he's come home. We learn that Haley's mother died in a car accident when her parents were driving home from a party. Her father was driving drunk and swerved into a lamppost, near their home. When he got out of the car and couldn't wake up Haley's mom (she died on impact), her father ran to their house and got her uncle for help. But by the time they returned to the car, the police were there and arrested her father.
Discussion Questions	• Haley wonders if she was betraying Esteban and the rest of the group by telling her uncle about Esteban's father. Do you think she was? Why or why not? • Why do you think Haley made her uncle stop calling her "Red?" Why does she seem to be okay with Amari calling her that? • Were you surprised by the reveal of why Haley's father is in prison? How did you react? • Why would Haley's uncle tell her that her father is just as scared as she is? Do you think that is true? • On page 93, why does Ashton think that the group doesn't care about other kids laughing at them in the cafeteria? • Why doesn't Haley share her story?
Possible Extension Activity	Little Green by Joni Mitchell Haley listens to the song Little Green by Joni Mitchell and thinks about it's meaning (Joni Mitchell wrote it about her daughter who he gave up for adoption when Joni was nineteen). • Listen to the song while reading along with the lyrics • Questions ○ What do you think the song is about? ○ Why might Haley relate to the song? What lyrics make you think that?

Chapters 27-32

Summary	Esteban is missing from school for an entire week and the group fears he's been taken like his father. In their worry, tensions flare and the groups finds themselves bickering until they realize Esteban wouldn't want them arguing. Tiago takes his turn to tell a story. He speaks about his dog, perrito, that he loved. He shares that he was on a walk with his mother and perrito, speaking in Spanish, when someone on the street yelled at them to speak in English because this is America. Ever since then, Tiago's mother only whispers when they are outside the house, which makes Tiago sad. Tiago expresses that he feels loved by the rest of the group because they never tell him to speak in English and instead ask him to learn Spanish. The next week, Esteban returns, though he says he doesn't know how long he'll be around. Immigration is now looking for his mother and they had to move into his aunt's house to hide. He shares another poem he received in the mail from his father and reads it aloud for the recorder. After Christmas vacation, the group returns and Amari comments on Holly's new shoes, calling her rich. Holly tucks her shoes under her chair to hide them. She argues with Amari, telling him she didn't choose to be rich and tells him she doesn't like it when he calls her "rich girl." During their argument, Holly realizes how much each of them cares what the other thinks of them. That Friday night, Haley is spending the night at Holly's, playing with Holly's expensive dolls, when Holly points out to Haley that she is rich, too. At first Haley denies it because she doesn't believe it, but Holly explains to her about her uncle's wealth and that she will be inheriting money from her mother's life insurance when she gets older. Holly asks why Haley hasn't told the group about her mother or father and encourages her to do so.
Discussion Questions	• How does Tiago describe the difference between his mom inside their home and outside their home? Why does he say this is? Why does Tiago's mom stop speaking Spanish in public? Is it shame or something else? • Do you think America is "the land of the free and the home of the brave?" Why or why not? • On Page 131, how do you interpret Esteban's father's poem? Who might "the dog" be? • Do you think it was alright for Amari to call Holly out on being rich? Why or why not? Why do you think Holly hid her feet under her desk? Do you think she should have done this? • Why doesn't Haley realize she's rich? How does Haley feel about her identity? • Haley says that people are dashes. What does she mean by this? • What did you learn from Tiago's story about Perrito?
Possible Extension Activity	Poetry Connection Esteban shares his father's poems with the kids in the ARTT room. They are filled with feeling and emotion. They have the power to make Esteban feel close to his father when he is very far away. • Encourage students to write poetry that Esteban might write to his father or write poetry for one of their family members. ○ Examples: An acrostic poem about a friend or family member, a haiku, a

	free verse that helps students explain to their family members about their current environment • Ask students: How does writing poetry help you communicate in a different way?
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Chapters 33-40

Summary	Haley shares her story to the rest of the group. She shares about the accident with her father and mother and she is relieved by the response the rest of the group gives her—they encourage her to keep talking. She tells about the first time she met Kira, Holly’s mother, who asked Haley where her mother was. When Haley told her she died, Kira instantly knew who Haley’s mother was. Kira and her had been pregnant together and spent a lot of time together. Haley shares that in that moment, she felt as if her mother had come back to her in a way, because she had someone who could share more about who her mother was. After the Easter break, Esteban does not return to school and Ms. Laverne tells the class that he and his family returned to the Dominican Republic. The class is heartbroken, but Haley plays for them the last poem oh his father’s that Esteban recorded, which spoke about being strong and holding onto friends and good memories when things get difficult. The end of the school year arrives and at their last meeting in the ARTT room, the group talks about their plans to come together in twenty years; how they’ll remain friends despite not coming to the ARTT room and being in the same class; that they’ll always have each other. They talk about how they first arrived at the ARTT room feeling nervous and scared, but it ended up being the best thing. Amari shows the group a picture he drew of all of them, and pins it to the wall in the room. With her father home and playing the piano downstairs, Haley sits at the top of the stairs listening and thinking. She realizes that she wants to talk to her father and tell him all about her friends. She goes to him and sits by his side while he plays the piano. She thinks to herself that that moment is the end of a story, but also the beginning of one.
Discussion Questions	• What is the significance of Esteban’s dad’s last poem? • How do these six friends harbor each other and the people around them? • Haley’s uncle says to forgive and forget. Haley eventually decides she can forgive but not forget. Who do you agree with? What’s the difference between forgiving and forgetting? Is one easier to do than the other? What do you believe about forgiveness? Does how you feel about forgiveness change whether you are asking for or giving it? • Do you think Haley forgives her father? • In twenty years, if the group came together, where do you think each of them would be in their lives? • Which of the six main characters’ stories most resonates with you? Why? • There’s a quote at the beginning of the book by author Betty Smith (A Tree Grows in Brooklyn). How does that quote relate to the story told in the book? • Several times throughout the book, the author refers to the Familiar and the Unfamiliar, implying that doing the Familiar is easy and the Unfamiliar, a challenge. What difference did facing the Unfamiliar make for these six students? What are your strategies when you are confronted with something that is unfamiliar?
Possible Extension Activity	Write a book review! BreakFree Education is collecting book reviews from students to share with our partners at Freedom Reads, authors, and on our website! Ask students to write a review and submit it to us.

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student book review template (students may choose to use this template or not)• Submit book reviews to initiatives@breakfree-ed.org |
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