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6th Grade Humanities Update

Rachel Stone • 14 days ago • Tuesday, Jan 18 at 3:29 PM • **6th Grade**

Dear Families,

I hope this finds you well! Here's a Humanities update:

We're in the middle of a very close reading of *Harbor Me*. We're exploring Jacqueline Woodson's expert literary work, studying her use of point of view, motif and theme. In December, students wrote their first literary claim paragraphs, supporting an idea about a theme or motif in the book with examples and excerpts. They're working on paragraph structure, and the idea of backing up an insight or claim about a book, rather than writing a book report/summary. This is a big stretch for many sixth graders, and I can see them working hard to rise to the intellectual challenge. We'll continue this type of assignment throughout the spring.

If you want to check out the book yourself, it's short (under 4 hours on Audio). It brings up difficult but important topics, from the point of view of fifth and sixth graders, as you can see in the [**Common Sense Media**](#) summary:

Parents need to know that Harbor Me, by Jacqueline Woodson, the 2018-19 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, is her first middle-grade novel since winning National Book Award for Brown Girl Dreaming. It celebrates the importance of allowing young people -- fifth-graders in this case -- a safe space in which to share their stories. The book deals with immigration and class issues, police brutality, driving under the influence, parent death, trust, and breaking down walls between people of different backgrounds to find common understanding and experience. Parents should be prepared to discuss the government's enforcement of immigration laws, anti-immigration sentiment, police brutality, and "the talk" often given to black boys about the police, parental loss, isolation, and peer counseling.

In our reading this week, Amari (a Black student in the book) processes his grief and frustration after the news that a Black kid was shot while playing with a toy gun at a park. Ashton (a white student in the book) works through an initial color-blind mentality and catches up on his ability to hear and support his friend. The members of the class lean into the special space they've created for each other in "A Room to Talk," as they process their individual struggles, touching on many different intersections of identity. This timing is partly intended to work with our launch of affinity groups this month. We did some vocabulary work to support this in class today as well, looking at the "big nine" social identities, and in particular ancestry, ethnicity, and race.

Before Winter Break, students wrote personal narratives, practicing using dialogue, interior monologues, sensory details and small actions to tell the inside story of a moment from their lives. Our next genres will include essay format and historical fiction, working with our study of artifacts and primary sources from ancient Sumer. Ask your student about what they noticed in The Standard of Ur (a fascinating artifact)! By next week, you can ask them what they think it shows about the benefits and costs of the shift to agriculture and complex cities in Mesopotamia.

We're also finishing up the first round of booktalks. Your students are doing an amazing job sharing their favorite recommendations and building enthusiasm for good books. They are all in the middle of great choice books, in addition to *Harbor Me*. In addition to occasional other assignments, the main homework in my class is still to read regularly! Something like 30 minutes a day, 5 or more days a week.

I'm so enjoying the enthusiasm, depth, curiosity, and kindness of this group of kids.

Warmly,
Rachel