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By Karen Brailsford

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LAST SUMMER WITH MAIZON

By Jacqueline Woodson.

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"Almost twins. We're best friends, jumpin' side by side," chant the 11-year-olds Margaret Tory and Maizon Singh as they skip rope in their Brooklyn neighborhood. "Turn around, touch the ground, up and give me five." They clap palms together. "Almost twins - could be cousins - coolest girls alive!"

"Last Summer With Maizon," a first novel by Jacqueline Woodson, chronicles the strain that threatens the two girls' friendship as they cope with the death of Margaret's father and confront their impending separation, brought about by Maizon's acceptance at a boarding school. A drama therapist in a New York City residence for runaway and homeless children, Ms. Woodson writes with a sure understanding of

the thoughts of young people, offering a poetic, eloquent narrative that is not simply a story of nearly adolescent children, but a mature exploration of grown-up issues: death, racism, independence, the nurturing of the gifted black child and, most important, self-discovery.

Ms. Woodson draws both characters' personalities with deft strokes as she details Margaret's evolution into a poet and the girls' realization that behind Maizon's brio hides a child who doesn't know everything after all. Though they claim to be "almost twins," they are quite dissimilar in style and temperament. Maizon leaps off the page garbed in a most outrageous outfit: a red and black dress copied from a magazine by her grandmother, large gold hoop earrings that weigh down her earlobes, errant eye liner and red globs of blush on her cheeks. Often thoughtless - even her grandmother admits she may be smart but doesn't always display common sense - Maizon is nevertheless envied by Margaret. "Sometimes it didn't seem fair. Maizon had everything," she grumbles to herself. But throughout the novel, Ms. Woodson hints that Maizon is certainly jealous of Margaret as well. For instance, Maizon, who sports a short Afro, combs Margaret's mane "longingly." She also wishes she belonged to a family like Margaret's, with parents and a brother like Li'l Jay, the inspiration for the most poignant sentence in "Last Summer With Maizon." Margaret goes into her little brother's room on the rainy night of her father's death and finds Maizon watching the sleeping toddler: "His thumb crept slowly to his mouth and soft sucking sounds mingled with storm." (Maizon's own mother died in childbirth, and her father deserted her shortly afterward.) Quiet and introspective, Margaret first appears with her legs dangling over the edge of the fire escape as she writes an entry in her diary. It becomes clear that though Maizon is always loud and vocal, it is Margaret whose voice will

eventually be heard. "I feel like I'm on one of those balance beams we have in gym class - balancing between today and tomorrow," she writes.

Some vibrant characters round out the cast. There is Ms. Dell, a hefty woman with an unusual shade of blue eyes. She has strange powers that enable her to foresee Margaret's upcoming trials. "Gonna learn about strength this summer," she quietly predicts. Hattie, Ms. Dell's 19-year-old daughter, writes poems that she says live inside her head, not on paper. Maizon's guardian and grandmother, a Cheyenne Indian, clicks knitting needles while spinning tales of the reservation.

As the plot unfolds, we realize that Maizon's departure is a blessing. "I feel like sometimes Maizon kept me from doing things," Margaret says. "Now I don't have any excuse not to do things." She then goes on to write an award-winning poem documenting the summer's anguish. "My pen doesn't write anymore," it begins. "It stumbles and trembles in my hand." Let's hope Jacqueline Woodson's pen writes steadily on.

Karen Brailsford is an editor at Elle magazine.

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