

# Ketanji Brown Jackson

Washington, D.C. · Miami · Cambridge · Washington, D.C.

## In Sixty Seconds

**Origins.** Ketanji Onyika Brown was born on September 14, 1970, in Washington, D.C., and moved with her family to Miami as an infant. Her father, Johnny Brown, was a public-school history teacher who attended law school at night and became a school-board attorney. Her mother, Ellery Brown, was a public-school principal. Ketanji was an award-winning high school debater. She was named an Outstanding High School Negro Youth of America and wrote in her 1988 Palmetto High School yearbook that she planned one day to have a judicial appointment.

**Work.** She graduated from Harvard College in 1992 and Harvard Law School in 1996, where she served as a supervising editor of the Harvard Law Review. She clerked for Justice Stephen Breyer in 1999 and 2000. She served as an assistant federal public defender in Washington from 2005 to 2007, as Vice Chair of the U.S. Sentencing Commission from 2010 to 2014, and as a U.S. District Judge in D.C. from 2013 to 2021. President Biden elevated her to the D.C. Circuit in 2021 and nominated her to the Supreme Court in 2022.

**Impact.** The Senate confirmed her on April 7, 2022, by a vote of 53 to 47. Three Republican senators crossed to support her. She was sworn in on June 30, 2022, and took her seat when Justice Breyer retired. She is the first Black woman on the Supreme Court of the United States, the first former federal public defender on the court since Thurgood Marshall, and the sixth woman to sit on the court.

**Legacy.** Her dissents in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (2023) and *Trump v. United States* (2024) entered law-school casebooks within a year. Her memoir, *Lovely One*, was published by Random House in 2024 and debuted at number one on the New York Times bestseller list. She sits on the court today. The record of what she does from this seat is being written in the United States Reports one opinion at a time.

## The Network

### Patrick Jackson

Husband. Harvard Law classmate and a twin descendant of an old Massachusetts family. A general surgeon who practices at Georgetown University Hospital and Massachusetts General. The couple married in 1996 and have two daughters.

### Ellery Brown

Father. A Miami public-school history teacher who attended the University of Miami School of Law at night and became chief attorney for the Miami-Dade County School Board. Swore his daughter in on his law school texts at the White House ceremony.

### Leila and Talia Jackson

Daughters. Their two children. Leila wrote a widely circulated 2016 letter to President Obama urging him to nominate her mother to the Supreme Court. Both were in the Senate gallery for the April 7, 2022 confirmation vote.

### Johnny Brown

Brother. A police officer and U.S. Army veteran who served in the Middle East. One of the first public figures to speak on her behalf during the 2022 confirmation process.

## For Discussion

1. Jackson is the first former federal public defender on the Supreme Court since Thurgood Marshall. What perspective does public-defender service bring to the bench that other pre-judicial career paths do not, and how does that perspective appear in her early opinions?
2. Her dissent in *Trump v. United States* closed with the line, "With deep disillusionment, I dissent." The formula is uncommon even among dissents. What does that closing line suggest about the function of a dissent written for a future readership rather than for the current majority, and what compares to it in the Supreme Court record of the last century?
3. The Senate confirmed Jackson 53 to 47 with Collins, Murkowski, and Romney crossing party lines. What do those three specific crossover votes reveal about the narrow set of conditions under which confirmation math still allows a partisan breach, and how does that math apply to lower-court confirmations today?
4. The Supreme Court had existed for 232 years before a Black woman sat on it. What explains the specific lag relative to the first Black man (eighty-four years longer), the first woman (forty-one years longer), and the first Black woman on a federal circuit court (twenty-one years longer)?
5. Jackson's 1988 Palmetto High School yearbook recorded her plan to have a judicial appointment. Her daughters watched the confirmation vote from the Senate gallery thirty-four years later. What conditions turn an adolescent ambition into a realized trajectory across three decades, and what does that continuity teach about early institutional signaling of life plans?

## Primary Sources

1. Jackson, Ketanji Brown. *Lovely One: A Memoir*. Random House, 2024.
2. U.S. Senate. Confirmation hearings for Ketanji Brown Jackson, Senate Judiciary Committee, March 21-24, 2022.
3. Supreme Court of the United States. Official biography and opinions of Associate Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, 2022-present.
4. American Bar Association, Standing Committee on the Federal Judiciary. Evaluation of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, February 2022. Federal Judicial Center. Biographical directory of Article III judges, entry for Ketanji Brown Jackson.



