



**Angela Johnson**

**Author Program In-depth Interview  
Insights Beyond the Slide Shows**

**Angela Johnson interviewed while in Madison, Wisconsin on October 6, 2005.**

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You've won the Coretta Scott King Author Award three times — for *Toning the Sweep*, *Heaven* and *The First Part Last*. Your book, *Heaven* was written before *The First Part Last* but is a sort of prequel to it. How did you come to write *The First Part Last* after having already written *Heaven*?

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** The wonderful thing about *The First Part Last* is I didn't want to write the book at all. As far as I'm concerned, I don't do prequels; I don't do sequels.

Then, I went to New York and visited some after-school programs for a week. I was on the subway and there was this beautiful kid. He looked about 15 or 16, and he was with a baby. It was 11:00 in the morning, and I was thinking, "Why is this kid not in school? Is this his daughter; is this his sister? What's the deal?"

The train stopped, and he got ready to get off the train, I actually wanted to follow this kid down the street and question him. Something came over me. I went back to the hotel and wrote three chapters of what became *The First Part Last*. I felt provoked, and I didn't want it to happen. Sometimes it just comes over you and there is the story or the character. *The First Part Last* was the easiest book I've ever written. Bobby was just there. Everything was there.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *The First Part Last*, like many of your books, carries some heavy messages, though your writing never comes off as preachy.

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** Preaching to teens about teenage pregnancy is like preaching to a lamp. These are human beings, and they do what they want.

*The First Part Last* is definitely a cautionary tale, but it's not preachy. Bobby loves his baby, but what has he lost? He's lost the love of his life at 16. He's lost many of his freedoms. His friends still love him, but he's lost part of that relationship. He's lost being a child, because he is now the daddy. I always figure, show what's real — you don't have to preach. I love Bobby's responsibility. He has almost a romantic belief that, "I've lost Nia, so I'm going to raise this baby." It's noble. But then reality sets in, and some of it is not pretty.

The majority of parents have said they like *The First Part Last*. But, I have had parents say, "I'm not letting my kid read this book because it'll give them ideas." I said, "Ideas about going into a coma? Ideas about having this baby who's weighed you down and you've lost your childhood?" I mean, which idea? Obviously these people haven't read the book.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Will you write about any other characters from *Heaven*?

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** Yes. One more book — it's called *Sweet*. It's about Shoogy. Shoogy is still unknowable to me. I'm writing about her, and yet I still don't really know her. She is an enigma.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You also write and have written many picture books. Where did your idea for *A Sweet Smell of Roses* emerge from?

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** I based the two little girls in *A Sweet Smell of Roses* on two real little girls who had marvelous spirit and participated in civil rights marches. In the documentary called *Eyes on the Prize*, two women were interviewed who were around seven and eight during the civil rights movement. They shared their experiences about how they would go off to marches without their parents. The wonderful thing is, the adults around them took care of them as if they were their own children.

Something really interesting happened in the creation of *A Sweet Smell of Roses*. In creating picture books, there's usually little or no collaboration between author and artist. The illustrator, Eric Velasquez, was selected by my editor; I never did share anything to him about why I wrote the book. Would you believe, Eric included artwork from the *Eyes on the Prize* documentary, and he wrote a foreword for the book about the documentary's filmmaker. It's just this bizarre kismet.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Several of your books don't have happy endings. How do you respond when people point this out?

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** At the end of some of my books, everything is not always happiness and light. Life is not always this big, jolly party. It is just life, and it just goes on. But I always like to leave the end as a beginning. It's not necessarily happy, and it's not necessarily sad. It is just life. I'm a happy person, but I'm a realist and I write contemporary realism.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You also like to include humor in your books.

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** I believe there should be more fun books with African-American children in them. We're inundated with family stories and folk tales and the happy family. I understand that; I write those books, too. But there has to be a place for humor.

I love humor in any way, shape or form. *Where Have You Gone, Vivian Dartow* is going to be my funny book. Writing this book, I relived high school all over again — I thought I had it down, and in reality, I was just the biggest nerd.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you do when you're stuck?

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** When I have trouble writing, I do everything but write. I like to travel when I'm blocked, and I usually come out of writing blocks after I travel.

As it turns out, my books are usually geographically motivated. I wrote *A Cool Moonlight* when I was in Aruba. I was on a beach with lots of sunlight writing a book about a child who can't go out in the daylight. I had just come back from Cape Cod when I wrote *Looking for Red*. *The First Part Last* came from New York, and *Toning the Sweep* came from when I was in the desert with my brother. *Bird* is the one book that was written when I was loving being at home.

There's always going to be something in life that will ignite you. I always believe that. It's going to be a newspaper article. It's going to be something you heard at the supermarket. It's going to be something you felt when you were going for a walk.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What other influences make their way into your writing?

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** I have two nieces and a nephew. When they were much younger, their presence in my life had an interesting effect on my writing. I took care of them a lot, and it gave me a sense of the world of children. It was wonderful. As they get older, I see myself writing books for older children.

It has always been important in my books that the adults can be even a little emotionally neglectful or just living their lives, but in the end there is a safety net with them. In a wonderfully healthy adolescence and teen world, your parents are there — they're supportive, they're loving, they're not too obnoxious — and you go on about your life. When you're home, you're secure and they're there and they leave you alone and then you go out again. I had a huge safety net in my parents as a teenager.

Every book has pieces from my life. For instance, all my nieces and nephews are biracial. I have gay friends who have children. I had a friend whose child ran away. I take looks around me. Another example is that a female friend of mine died, and one of her children kept thinking she saw her, as a ghost out in the garden. There are so many things that I've incorporated in my books. Obviously, these are subjects that I care about and are important.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you like to talk with students about?

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** I always ask if any of them journal. I find journaling is a touchstone. When kids do that, they are secure in their writing. There are kids who, as far as they're concerned, writing stops when they leave the school. But, there are kids who are putting down any feelings they have; they're raging on paper. I say not everyone is going to be a writer, but everyone can write. No one ever has to see what they've written.

I tell them "We're not all going to be published, but your emotions — all of you have such strong emotions! Start journaling and become comfortable with what you feel. Write it down and remember. If nothing else, when you're 40 you can laugh about it like I do when I look back at mine."

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What sorts of things happen when young people write?

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** I'm amazed by teen poets — the poetry slams are just amazing. I am in love with the idea of teenagers getting up there and just going for it. The kids who are participating in poetry slams are the ones with something deep about them, and in recent years, now have this incredible outlet.

When I was in school, if there were some guys who were poets, I didn't know it. Now you're seeing these young men who are. I love that they're being handed the power to do something positive.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Have you ever run up against censorship of your books?

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** I have been asked not to come on author visits. I don't know that I have been banned.

One private religious school asked me not to come because in *Toning the Sweep* I talk about lynching — not graphically, of course, but I do talk about lynching. Even though I was

going to speak to their elementary-aged children, who were too young to have read the book, they said, “We just need to know that you will not mention that book.” I said, “No, I’m sorry, I can’t do that.” So they asked me not to come.

Last year in Michigan, I was speaking to a library reading club, and a couple days before I came, the aide associated with the club decided to call the parents and tell them that in *The First Part Last*, which was one of the books that the kids were reading, I had “language.” She made calls to the library board, she called the parents, and she got nothing. Everyone felt the book was age-appropriate — what kids don’t speak like this?

The reasons for banning books are just ludicrous to me. It’s interesting to me that the last thing that is banned is always violence. Sexuality, language and content are banned. Violence is not. You can blow up a few buildings, and you can have people dragged down the street. People will stick guns in their children’s hands and send them out in the woods to shoot animals, but they don’t want to hear about sex. It’s so ridiculous.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please describe your writing process.

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** I like to write longhand on legal pads. I just stick my legal pad in my backpack and go down to the park. Nowadays, everybody’s in the coffeehouses on their laptops. That really freaks me out. I just started with a computer a couple years ago, but I think I’ll always have the legal pads with me as well.

I lost the first half of *Toning the Sweep* on a word processor with no hard drive in it. It was before I understood about hard copies. I lived in a neighborhood next to an elementary school that always used to blow the electricity. At least twice a day the electricity on the whole street would go out. And there I was, page 47, I remember it vividly, had not printed anything. Everything was saved on a disk. I didn’t push the little “s.” The electricity went out, and it was all gone.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How did you come to write in such a wide variety of formats (picture books, poetry, novels)?

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** I lucked out in the beginning of my career with my editor, Richard Jackson. He never told me that I had to make choices. He never said, “You write picture books.” There was never a time when he said, “You can’t write poetry or short stories.” I have a collection of short stories. I wrote board books. Anything I wrote, he said, “Okay.”

Then, I started meeting other writers and saw that there are people who just write novels. I know I sound naïve, but I was surprised that they just write novels or they just write picture books or they just write poetry. I thought it was a given to write whatever I felt like, and I thought everyone did it. There are no parameters for me, which is wonderful. The only thing I won’t touch is adult literature. But as far as kids’ stuff is concerned, preschool to teen and all forms in between are great.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you believe is the importance of writing books with African-American protagonists?

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** I can equate it to the first time I was in school and I picked up a book by Ezra Jack Keats. I opened a book and there were children who looked like me. I cannot tell you

the world that opened up. When I was a child, Ezra Jack Keats' books were the only ones with African American children in them.

What he was doing was looking out his window and these were the children he was seeing. It doesn't matter that he was white. There was a little girl in a tiny library in Ohio — me — who opened up this book and saw someone who had my skin color.

In all my books, though the stories are universal, the protagonist will likely be an African-American child, because I remember that feeling of being in a sea of books where no one looked like me. My textbooks did not have any African American children. Finally in the '70s I started to see books with African-American child protagonists, including the book *Cornbread, Earl and Me*.

Even though I want this to be a universal experience, I love the idea that there is an African-American child saying, "This belongs to me. Someone has recognized that kids who look like me are important and valid."

I've gone to schools that were mostly white, and I've had children ask me, "Why do you just write books with black children?" I say, "I'm African American, and I'm writing through my eyes." And then I say, "When you go into your library, how many books do you pick up that have kids who look just like you?" And they always say, "Yeah, there are a lot of them, aren't there?" Then I say, "Don't you think you need a few more like these, too?" And they say, "Yeah, okay."

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Despite an emphasis on African-American characters, the themes and emotional journeys in your books strike a universal chord.

**ANGELA JOHNSON:** I believe we're all connected. One of the big problems in this country is people don't always feel that they are connected. We're all on this road together, bumping into each other, and we're all so connected. We have been thrown in this place. There has to come a time where we say, "It doesn't really matter if he's black or if he's Asian or if he's white. This is a universal story."

In the end what I want is for anyone to be able to pick up one of these books and it doesn't matter: the color of the children, where they live. All of these stories are everyone's story. If anyone can pick my book up and say, "Yes, this is just a wonderful story; I've felt this; I knew someone who felt this," then I've done what I was supposed to do. What else is there? It's great. It's better than ice cream.

### Books by Angela Johnson

- LILY BROWN'S PAINTINGS (illustrated by E. B. Lewis), Orchard Books, 2007
- WIND FLYERS (illustrated by Loren Long), Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2007
- SWEET SMELL OF ROSES, A (illustrated by Eric Velasquez), Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2005
- BIRD, Dial Books, 2004
- JUST LIKE JOSH GIBSON (illustrated by Beth Peck), Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2004
- VIOLET'S MUSIC (illustrated by Laura Huliska-Beith), Dial Books for Young Readers, 2004
- COOL MOONLIGHT, A, Dial Books, 2003
- I DREAM OF TRAINS (illustrated by Loren Long), Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2003
- FIRST PART LAST, THE, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2003
- LOOKING FOR RED, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2002
- RUNNING BACK TO LUDI (illustrated by Angelo), Orchard Books, 2001

- THOSE BUILDING MEN (illustrated by Barry Moser), The Blue Sky Press / an imprint of Scholastic Inc., 2001
- DOWN THE WINDING ROAD (illustrated by Shane Evans), DK Ink, 2000
- WHEN MULES FLEW ON MAGNOLIA STREET (illustrated by John Ward), Alfred A. Knopf / Random House, 2000
- MANIAC MONKEYS ON MAGNOLIA STREET (illustrated by John Ward), Alfred A. Knopf / Random House, 1999
- WEDDING, THE (illustrated by David Soman), Orchard Books, 1999
- GONE FROM HOME: SHORT TAKES, DK Publishing, 1998
- HEAVEN, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1998
- SONGS OF FAITH, Orchard Books, 1998
- OTHER SIDE, SHORTER POEMS, THE, Orchard Books, 1998
- DADDY CALLS ME MAN (illustrated by Rhonda Mitchell), Orchard Books, 1997
- ROLLING STORE, THE (illustrated by Peter Catalanotto), Orchard Books, 1997
- AUNT IN OUR HOUSE, THE (illustrated by David Soman), Orchard Books, 1996
- HUMMING WHISPERS, Orchard Books, 1995
- SHOES LIKE MISS ALICE'S (illustrated by Ken Page), Orchard Books, 1995
- JOSHUA BY THE SEA (illustrated by Rhonda Mitchell), Orchard Books, 1994
- JOSHUA'S NIGHT WHISPERS (illustrated by Rhonda Mitchell), Orchard Books, 1994
- MAMA BIRD, BABY BIRDS (illustrated by Rhonda Mitchell), Orchard Books, 1994
- RAIN FEET (illustrated by Rhonda Mitchell), Orchard Books, 1994
- JULIUS (illustrated by Dav Pilkey), Orchard Books, 1993
- GIRL WHO WORE SNAKES, THE (illustrated by James Ransome), Richard Jackson Books / Orchard Books, 1993
- TONING THE SWEEP, Richard Jackson Books / Orchard Books, 1993
- LEAVING MORNING, THE (illustrated by David Soman), Orchard Books, 1992
- ONE OF THREE (illustrated by David Soman), Orchard Books, 1991
- DO LIKE KYLA (illustrated by James Ransome), Orchard Books, 1990
- WHEN I AM OLD WITH YOU (illustrated by David Soman), Orchard Books, 1990
- TELL ME A STORY, MAMA (illustrated by David Soman), Orchard Books, 1988

This In-depth Written Interview is created by TeachingBooks.net for educational purposes and may be copied and distributed solely for these purposes for no charge as long as the copyright information remains on all copies.

Questions regarding this program should be directed to [info@teachingbooks.net](mailto:info@teachingbooks.net).

Copyright ©2006 TeachingBooks.net LLC. All rights reserved.

