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Angela Johnson: Award-Winning Novels and the Search for Self

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Angela Johnson:

Award-winning Novels and the Search for Self

It was over a decade ago when Rudine Sims Bishop (1992) prophetically dubbed Angela Johnson as possibly one of “the most prominent African-American literary artists of the next generation” (616). At the time she had four picture books to her credit, but the following year she would publish her debut young adult novel, *Toning the Sweep*. From there, a number of other award-winners would follow and the total of young adult books would increase to eleven and counting. To date, Johnson has three Coretta Scott King Awards, a Michael L. Printz award, and the “Genius Grant” on her list of accolades. Here, I wish to look closely at the search for self in three of Johnson’s award-winners: *Toning the Sweep* (1993), *Heaven* (1998), and *The First Part Last* (2003).

Finding Self in Others

Readers, adult and young adult alike, readily embraced Emily, the protagonist of *Toning the Sweep*, Johnson’s first novel. Emily and her mother, Diane, have come to Little Rock, California to help Ola, who is dying of cancer, pack up her things and move to Ohio with them. This is a pivotal summer for all involved, but especially for Emily. While trying to make sense of Ola’s fatal illness and what it will mean, Emily discovers how she is connected to Ola and to other key members of her family. It is through story that Emily peels back the layers of herself, exposing complex relationships, traditions, and a strong sense of self. Emily uses the video camera to record the stories she hopes will document her grandmother’s existence.

Interview

KH: The search for self seems to be a recurring theme in your young adult novels. What’s the message you hope to leave with young readers?

AJ: I never consciously believe when I am writing that I am imparting any messages to my readers. The characters are so personal to me it seems I imbibe them with all that I remember about my feelings at that age. And truly, understanding self and standing alone when I had to was very important to me as a teen

KH: What kinds of responses do you receive from readers of your young adult books?

AJ: I had never really thought about reader response to my books that much until *The First Part Last* was released. Kids tend to be very polite about what they think about a book. But I know if it doesn’t hit them the first three pages, they don’t want to read it—unless forced. But they don’t tend to tell me that.

Heaven is a quiet book that has a few die-hard fans, but I know that a lot of kids find it too introspective for them.

KH: *The First Part Last* is a prequel to *Heaven*. Why did you feel the need to tell Bobby’s story? Will you add to this series?

Sally Hirt, the owner of a local store, tells the most revealing story, helping Emily understand the devastation her mother must have felt after discovering her father's dead body in the woods. She was only fourteen years old at the time. Immediately after the hate crime, Ola took her daughter out of the south, altering their relationship forever. Hearing this increases Emily's curiosity about her family.

Looking through her grandfather's old things brings her closer to him, providing a part of herself

she had no idea was missing. Before long she decides she must employ an African tradition—toning the sweep—in order to help the family reconcile her grandfather's death. Toning the sweep involves striking a plow to release a resounding ring thought to aid a love one's journey from life to death. It is not until Emily's mother informs her that she and her father toned the sweep for his mother that she realizes that the tradition actually belongs to her. Once Emily and her mother tone the sweep, they go to the party given for Ola, who will soon die. While Emily knows they will tone the sweep for her

some day, she also knows Ola will remain a part of who she is as her grandfather has done.

Discovering Self

Heaven, which earned Johnson a second Coretta Scott King author award, offers the story of Marley, a fourteen-year-old who discovers she is adopted. In the beginning, Marley makes it clear that she knows who she is and is pleased with who she is becoming. Her sense of her own identity remains firm until a letter confirming her adoption devastates and angers her, calling everything she thought she knew about herself into question. Throughout the rest of the novel, she

AJ: I was asked to write a prequel to *Heaven*. My editor thought the response to Bobby was amazing as a care taking African American teen father he thought everyone wanted to know more about him. At first—I didn't think so. But with a bit of inspiration, I agreed.

The First Part Last is unique in that it's the first of my books with an extremely positive young male reader response. That got my attention as we all worry about our young men reading. Interestingly enough there were a large amount of young women who were upset that the grandmother in the book was not raising her son's child. I found that fascinating. It made for some very good discussions.

There may be a third companion to *Heaven* and *The First Part Last*.

KH: Will any new novels, short stories, or picture books be released soon?

AJ: I believe I have a picture book—*Wind Flyers*—coming out in the winter illustrated by Loren Long. It's beautiful

And if I work hard and concentrate, maybe I can get my focus back on novels.

grapples with notions of her own self-perceived identity. Having defined herself in large part in relation to her position in the family, Marley becomes preoccupied with exploring the concept of the family unit. The question becomes: Can her identity remain intact if her family isn't? Biological mother Christine is dead and her father Jack is unstable, so where does this leave Marley? Can her identity rest within a family structure that differs from what Marley has been conditioned to believe is ideal? In order for Marley to answer these questions and feel affirmed, she must prove to herself that a search for identity is not necessary because her family structure is a legitimate one. She does this by exploring the family structures in her community and discovering that the one seemingly ideal family is possibly dysfunctional and has definitely produced a daughter who has no real understanding of who she is. It is the single parent home of Bobby Morris and her relationship with her

adopted parents that finally leaves Marley certain that family are “. . . the people who have always been there for you” (Johnson 99)

Constructing Self

In 2003, Johnson published *The First Part Last*, the prequel to *Heaven*. While on the cusp of manhood, Bobby Morris learns he will be a teen father. Initially, he and his girlfriend Nia decide to put the baby up for adoption. But when Nia unexpectedly slips into a coma, Bobby decides he wants to raise his daughter himself. To Bobby, this action will decide if he will remain a boy or develop into a man. Since Just Frank spends his mornings drinking beer and standing on corners, Bobby believes he is a bum who has no right to ask him if he is “being a ‘man,’” yet the answer to Just Frank’s question plagues him (Johnson 7). “Being a ‘man’” is a slippery concept that has little to do with masculinity. Identity is socially constructed and constantly changing (King, 1997). When Just Frank is killed trying to protect a girl in danger, it is this act that Bobby is challenged to reconsider Just Frank’s manhood and to wonder what type of self he will become.

Having earned a Coretta Scott King author award and a Michael L. Printz award, Johnson was invited to speak at the American Library Association conference in 2004. In her acceptance speech for the Printz award, she said Bobby told her “I’m a young teenage father. The world sees me as just another black boy who’s got a baby. I want to be a man, a father.” Unlike the protagonist in the two novels above, Bobby fears his identity is “always already identified” by society because he is a black male teen father (Mostern 1999, p.4). Despite Bobby’s numerous shortcomings, throughout the novel and in *Heaven* it is clear that he is constantly striving to mold himself into the type of black man he can be proud of.

Conclusion

In a recent interview with Richard Jackson, Johnson’s first editor, I asked him why he encouraged

Johnson to begin writing young adult literature during a time when she had little interest in doing so (Hinton, 2006). “I knew she could do it. It was important for literature. She was such an extraordinary writer who is a poet, so I thought older children should be able to read her words and get her sense of what it’s like to grow up in this country,” he said. Jackson is right. In the novels discussed here, Johnson is at her best, providing readers with a glimpse of what coming-into-self is like during young adulthood.

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