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# First Part Last

by Angela Johnson

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## Summary

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***This little thing with the perfect face and hands doing nothing but counting on me. And me wanting nothing else but to run crying into my own mom's room and have her do the whole thing. It's not going to happen....***



Bobby is your classic urban teenaged boy -- impulsive, eager, restless. On his sixteenth birthday he gets some news from his girlfriend, Nia, that changes his life forever. She's pregnant. Bobby's going to be a father. Suddenly things like school and house parties and hanging with friends no longer seem important as they're replaced by visits to Nia's obstetrician and a social worker who says that the only way for Nia and Bobby to lead a normal life is to put their baby up for adoption.

With powerful language and keen insight, Johnson looks at the male side of teen pregnancy as she delves into one young man's struggle to figure out what "the right thing" is and then to do it. No matter what the cost.

<http://books.simonandschuster.com/First-Part-Last/Angela-Johnson>



## About the Author

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[www.nationalbook.org/.../biopics/ajohnson.jpg](http://www.nationalbook.org/.../biopics/ajohnson.jpg)

Since 1989 Angela Johnson has been steadily producing exceptional books for young people, ranging from picture books for children to novels, poetry, and short stories for young adults. Her works have earned her the adoration of fans and the admiration of reviewers, many of whom have commented on her exceptional ability to create memorable, real characters who stay in readers' minds long after the book cover has been closed. In most of her books Johnson addresses personal, everyday subjects: family relationships, the difficulties of growing up, seeking comfort from loved ones during times of struggle. A number of reviewers have noted that, while many of Johnson's characters are African American, the circumstances they confront and the emotions they express are so true to life that they can be appreciated by all readers. Johnson's editor, Kevin Lewis, stated in an article for the Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service, "A reader might begin thinking that they have nothing in common with [Johnson's characters], but by the end they realize that the list of things people share—things like family, friends, struggle, change, love, loss, dreams, and so on—is much more profound [or, meaningful] than the list of our differences."

### The origins of a writer

Born in 1961 in Tuskegee, Alabama, Johnson grew up in Alabama and Ohio. Reading and listening to stories was a significant part of her childhood. Her father and grandfather were natural storytellers, and Johnson can pinpoint the moment when she realized that her own fondness for stories was more than a passing interest. As described on the *African American Literature Book Club (AALBC)* Web site, Johnson recalled hearing a particularly compelling storyteller during her early school years. She realized that the characters of her favorite books had come alive

in her mind, becoming as real as the children sitting next to her in school. "That is when I knew," she remembered. "I asked for a diary that year and have not stopped writing."

"Kids and teens are so much more interesting than adults. Life is happening when you are a teenager. One minute you're a child, the next you're allowed to go out in the world by yourself. Who knows what will happen?"

One of the ideas that has occupied Johnson as a writer is a child's search for truth or, rather, the quest to uncover what she calls "the big lie"—the feeling that one's parents might not be who they seem, or that the things a child has always accepted as reality might not be true. In an interview in the magazine *Booklist*, Johnson stated: "There's always that point when kids rifle through their parents' papers to make sure they weren't adopted. I was probably about nine or ten when I picked my dad's lockbox with a bobby pin. And it's really interesting because I didn't have that big lie in my life! But I had so many friends who did." She went on to say that once she became a writer she realized that "you can get a great story from the big lie."

<http://www.notablebiographies.com/news/Ge-La/Johnson-Angela.html>



# Book Review

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## **From School Library Journal**

Grade 8 Up-Brief, poetic, and absolutely riveting, this gem of a novel tells the story of a young father struggling to raise an infant. Bobby, 16, is a sensitive and intelligent narrator. His parents are supportive but refuse to take over the child-care duties, so he struggles to balance parenting, school, and friends who don't comprehend his new role. Alternate chapters go back to the story of Bobby's relationship with his girlfriend Nia and how parents and friends reacted to the news of her pregnancy. Bobby's parents are well-developed characters, Nia's upper-class family somewhat less so. Flashbacks lead to the revelation in the final chapters that Nia is in an irreversible coma caused by eclampsia. This twist, which explains why Bobby is raising Feather on his own against the advice of both families, seems melodramatic. So does a chapter in which Bobby snaps from the pressure and spends an entire day spray painting a picture on a brick wall, only to be arrested for vandalism. However, any flaws in the plot are overshadowed by the beautiful writing. Scenes in which Bobby expresses his love for his daughter are breathtaking. Teens who enjoyed Margaret Bechard's *Hanging on to Max* (Millbrook, 2002) will love this book, too, despite very different conclusions. The attractive cover photo of a young black man cradling an infant will attract readers. *Miranda Doyle, San Francisco Public Library*

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## **From Booklist**

Gr. 6-12. Bobby, the teenage artist and single-parent dad in Johnson's Coretta Scott King Award winner, *Heaven* (1998), tells his story here. At 16, he's scared to be raising his baby, Feather, but he's totally devoted to caring for her, even as she keeps him up all night, and he knows that his college plans are on hold. In short chapters alternating between "now" and "then," he talks about the baby that now fills his life, and he remembers the pregnancy of his beloved girlfriend, Nia. Yes, the teens' parents were right. The couple should have used birth control; adoption could have meant freedom. But when Nia suffers irreversible postpartum brain damage, Bobby takes their newborn baby home. There's no romanticizing. The exhaustion is real, and Bobby gets in trouble with the police and nearly messes up everything. But from the first page, readers feel the physical reality of Bobby's new world: what it's like to hold Feather on his stomach, smell her skin, touch her clenched fists, feel her shiver, and kiss the top of her curly head. Johnson makes

poetry with the simplest words in short, spare sentences that teens will read again and again. The great cover photo shows the strong African American teen holding his tiny baby in his arms. *Hazel Rochman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the [Hardcover](#) edition.*

## **Kirkus Reviews**

"The rules: If she hollers, she is mine. If she needs to be changed, she is always mine. In the dictionary next to 'sitter,' there is not a picture of Grandma. It's time to grow up. Too late, you're out of time. Be a grown-up." Sixteen-year-old Bobby has met the love of his life: his daughter. Told in alternating chapters that take place "then" and "now," Bobby relates the hour-by-hour tribulations and joys of caring for a newborn, and the circumstances that got him there. Managing to cope with support, but little help, from his single mother (who wants to make sure he does this on his own), Bobby struggles to maintain friendships and a school career while giving his daughter the love and care she craves from him at every moment. By narrating from a realistic first-person voice, Johnson manages to convey a story that is always complex, never preachy. The somewhat pat ending doesn't diminish the impact of this short, involving story. It's the tale of one young man and his choices, which many young readers will appreciate and enjoy. (Fiction. YA) <http://search.barnesandnoble.com/The-First-Part-Last/Angela-Johnson>



## **Awards Received**

Michael L. Printz Award

Coretta Scott King Award

YALSA Best Books for Young Adults 2004

YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers 2004



# Discussion Questions

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## **Pre-reading:**

How do you think your life would change as a teenager if you suddenly had the responsibility of an infant? Make a schedule of your life as it is now (look at your day planner) and then make a new one based on a life with baby.

## **Post reading:**

1. Describe how Bobby and Nia's parents react to the news of her pregnancy. How would yours?
2. Find a quote that most reveals who Bobby is as a person. Explain why you picked it.
3. What kind of father Bobby is to Feather?
4. What do you think is the most difficult thing for Bobby? Why?
5. Predict what happens to this family ten years into the future. Explain why.
6. Write ten questions you would ask Bobby, Mary, and Nia if you could.
7. On page 35 Bobby says, "... which pisses her off and makes her scream, and then I look around my room and miss me." Explain what he means.
8. Angela Johnson tells the story in a non-linear fashion. Why, do you think, she chose this literary device to reveal the story?
9. How would you cope under the extraordinary circumstances that Bobby finds himself?
10. Would you make the same choices?
11. If Bobby had Nia's help raising Feather would he be a different father? What makes you think so?
12. Do you agree with Mary and Fred's approach to grandparenthood? Why or why not?



## Author Interview

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Kaavonia M. **Hinton-Johnson** with Angela **Johnson** 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 diehard 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?

**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.



## Further Reading

If you liked **THE FIRST PART LAST** by Angela Johnson, you might like to read the following books, too!

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**HANGING ONTO MAX** by Margaret Bechard

**WHO AM I WITHOUT HIM** by Sharon Flake

**SLAM** by Nick Hornby

**HEAVEN** BY ANGELA JOHNSON (PREQUAL TO THE FIRST PART LAST)

**THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART TIME INDIAN** by Sherman Alexie