

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Heaven by Angela Johnson

Book Information

Angela Johnson, Heaven
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Fourteen-year-old Marley's seemingly perfect life in the small town of Heaven is disrupted when she discovers that her father and mother are not her biological parents.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Coretta Scott King Award/Honors

Topics: English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 4, 90%; Family Life, Adoption; People, African American; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

Main Characters

Bobby Morris a friend of Marley who asks her to babysit his daughter
Butchy Carroll Momma and Pops' son, whom Marley knows as her brother
Christine Floyd Marley's deceased biological mother
Feather Morris Bobby Morris's baby girl, whom Marley babysits
Kevin Carroll (Pops) Marley's uncle, whom Marley knows as her father
Lucy Carroll (Momma) Marley's aunt, whom Marley knows as her mother
Marley Carroll a fourteen-year-old girl living with her family in Heaven, Ohio, who struggles to find her identity; originally, her name was Monna Floyd

Mr. and Mrs. Maple Shoogy's seemingly perfect parents
Shoogy Maple Marley's best friend
Uncle Jack Carroll Kevin Carroll's twin brother and Marley's biological father

Vocabulary

alien strange; foreign
destiny fate
postmark the mark on an envelope that identifies the date and place of its origin
Western Union a company known for sending telegrams

Synopsis

Fourteen-year-old Marley Carroll and her family have moved to Heaven, Ohio. Marley loves her Momma and Pops and her brother, Butchy. She feels fortunate to also have her Uncle Jack. For all of Marley's life she has been receiving letters from him, even though the two do not have contact beyond their letters. In contrast, the family of Shoogy, Marley's best friend, makes Marley uneasy. Marley's other friend is Bobby, a single father raising his daughter, Feather. To Marley, her life seems ideal compared to Shoogy's and Bobby's.

However, one day Momma and Pops must reveal to Marley that Uncle Jack is her biological father and that they are technically her aunt and uncle. Marley's mother, Christine, died when Marley was very young, and Jack felt he could not care for Marley. Marley is angry that her parents kept this secret from her all her life, and she cannot understand why they lied to her. Marley's anger is so deep that she will not discuss the topic with Momma and Pops. As she questions her own identity, she turns to Shoogy and Bobby for support.

Two weeks later, Momma and Pops give Marley a box that contains some of her baby things and some love letters that Christine wrote to Jack. The items in the box make her feel better, and she finally is able to ask Pops why they did not tell her the truth when she was little.

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As Marley struggles to define who she is, she understands that her friends have their own family struggles as well. Shoogy does not fit in with her family, so she cuts her legs in an attempt to block out pain. Marley realizes Bobby is trying to be a good father to Feather but knows he is unsure about himself in that role.

Several weeks later, Jack sends a letter saying he is coming to Heaven to see Marley. When he arrives, Marley enjoys his company and shows him around the town. As Marley enjoys her time with Jack, she realizes that her identity and family are still intact, even though their titles have been redefined. Marley is finally able to recognize who she is and see that, in spite of her recent problems, she does have a wonderful life.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What are some reasons Momma and Pops allowed Marley to believe that Jack was her uncle?

There are several possibilities. Perhaps Jack had asked them not to tell Marley that he is her biological father. Maybe Momma and Pops wanted her to feel as loved as their son, Butchy, and they were afraid that if Marley found out the truth, she would think they did not really love her or that Jack did not love her. Another possibility is that as they grew to love her, they thought of her as their very own.

Literary Analysis

What is the author's purpose in using Jack's letters in the story?

Jack has been writing to Marley since she was little. The letters have helped Marley learn who Jack is, what he does, and how he loves her. By showing the reader some of his letters, the reader gets to know Jack in much the same way Marley got to know him. The bits and pieces of information are sometimes out of order and confusing, but this probably reflects the way Marley has felt as she learns about Jack through his letters.

Inferential Comprehension

At the end of the story, Jack tells Marley a story about Christine taking eight-day-old Marley out on the porch to watch a storm. What conclusions might Marley have drawn after hearing the story?

In the story, Christine wrapped baby Marley in a blanket and sang to her on the porch swing as they faced the storm. When Marley heard this story she may have realized how much Christine loved her and wanted her to be strong in the face of adversity. Marley also may have remembered the time Momma and Pops stayed with her when a storm came. Both of these storms are a way of showing Marley that the people who love her want to protect her and help her to be brave during life's "storms."

Constructing Meaning

Why does Marley feel so bad when she loses Christine's letter?

Carrying the letter in her pocket probably helps Marley feel better in the same way that carrying the baby hospital bracelet with her name on it gives her comfort. In fact, Marley states that having the letter is like having her mother hold her in her lap; it is something she can keep that is part of Christine. She also feels that the box and its contents represent what she is and what was kept from her for fourteen years. When she loses the letter, she loses a part of her life that she has just reclaimed.

Teachable Skills

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Recognizing Details Butchy searches for his birth certificate in Momma and Pop's room. Ask students to list the kind of information listed on a birth certificate, to think of some situations when a birth certificate may be required to prove one's identity, and to find out how people can obtain a copy of their own birth certificate. Have them interview adults to gather information and then write a report on their findings.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Marley hears about several incidents of church burnings. Have the students work in pairs or groups to check the library or the Internet for the history of the church burnings of 1996. Have them answer specific questions about the burnings or make a report on their findings. What is arson? In what cities and states did the church burnings take place? Who started the fires? For what likely reason were the fires started? Was anyone ever identified and prosecuted for starting one of the fires? Were any of the churches rebuilt? What impact did the burnings have on the towns in which they occurred?

Identifying Reasons Jack gave his daughter to his brother and sister-in-law when she was a baby. Have the students work in groups to discuss Jack's reason for giving Marley to Momma and Pops to raise. Have them consider why he made his choice and what other alternatives he had. Ask them to think about his letters to Marley and what he was trying to accomplish in the letters. Finally, have students write a letter from Jack to Marley that explains his position.

Responding to Literature After many years of letter writing, Jack finally comes to see Marley in person. Ask students to imagine themselves in Marley's place when Jack comes to town to see Marley. How would they feel in Marley's position? How would they treat Jack? What would they say to him? Have students form small groups in which each will create a skit with the characters Marley, Jack, Momma, and Pops. Ask the groups to create other possible outcomes to this scene. Have them stage, rehearse, and perform the skit for the rest of the class.