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Activist Authors of the 44th Annual Georgia Children's Book Award and Conference

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Abstract

Four renowned authors, Deborah Wiles, Angela Johnson, Molly Bang, and Pat Mora, participated in the 44th Annual Georgia Children's Book Award conference. This article describes how each of these women demonstrates that there are multiple approaches to cultivating literacy through children's literature.

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As activists for literacy, members of the [Georgia Children's Book Award organization \(GCBA\)](#) have been promoting a love of reading and introducing children to books of literary excellence since 1968. Each spring, The University of Georgia is host to the GCBA conference, one of the largest children's literature events in the Southeast. Its primary purpose is to inspire and support educators, media specialists, researchers, and community members in being literature-to-literacy activists for children.

Inviting top children's book authors and illustrators to talk about their creative work and literacy lives is one of the ways GCBA inspires conference attendees. Internationally renowned, award-winners Molly Bang, Angela Johnson, Pat Mora, and Deborah Wiles were among the authors and illustrators who spoke at this year's conference and participated in a variety of events with attendees. This article examines how each of these talented women approaches literacy activism through the books she creates as much as through the ways she engages with others.

Deborah Wiles: Pushing the Boundaries of Historical Fiction

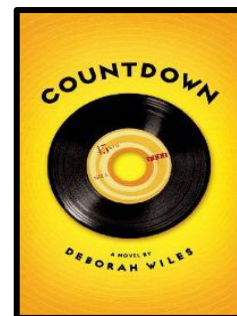
Opening the conference with sincerity and humor, [National Book Award Finalist Deborah Wiles](#) embraces the title of activist. She sees her work as a means to release stories into the world that reflect perspectives neither readily remembered nor included in today's dominant U.S. culture. Her 1960's trilogy, which begins with the documentary novel *Countdown*, positions young readers alongside the adolescent Franny Chapman. Franny feels as though everyone is consumed by fear of the Cuban Missile Crisis and she hardly knows how respond to the world around her, let alone her family and friends. Nonetheless, she has to navigate the uncertainties of the future.



[Deborah Wiles](#)

In order to illustrate the complexities of the social, cultural, and political climates that Franny experiences in the 1960's, Wiles includes a range of primary documents in the novel, including photographs, newspaper headlines, letters, quotes, song lyrics, and the like. The audio version of *Countdown* features as part of the story original recordings of President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev, clips of radio and television newscasts, as well as music and other audio documents of the period.

Although it might appear that Wiles set out to disrupt the traditional structure of historical fiction novels, this was not her motive. Seated around a table with conference attendees at one of the GCBA events, Wiles reflected on her rationale for formatting *Countdown* as a documentary novel. She shared that she wanted to firmly ground Franny's life experience in the 1960's – nothing more, nothing less. With the support of her editor David Levithan, Wiles breathed life into Franny's experience of the 1960's in a way that was new to the genre of historical fiction novel for young readers. Such a new approach also required Wiles' publisher Scholastic Press to embrace the role of activist in making a financial commitment to pay copyright royalties for the original materials in the novel.



The resources and audio playlists that Wiles compiled for the 1960's trilogy are accessible via Wiles' [Pinterest page](#). Here, readers can check out the songs and speech snippets that actually appear in *Countdown*. They can also explore Wiles' playlist and photo files for her upcoming second book of the '60s trilogy, which focuses on the Freedom Summer voter registration initiative of 1964 in Greenwood, Mississippi. This new book will be released in 2014. For more information about Deborah Wiles' books and life as an activist writer, visit her [website](#).

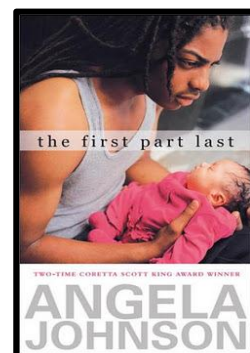
Angela Johnson: Giving Voice to Untold Stories



[Angela Johnson](#)

Like Wiles, award-winning writer, Angela Johnson also fosters activist literacy through the books she chooses to write, all of which advocate for social consciousness and reflection. With a strong voice, Johnson integrates the experiences of many who identify as African Americans in her characters, and by doing so, creates space for dialogue about sensitive themes – something that is not easily accomplished. She encompasses issues that may once have been considered taboo in literature for children and young adults and thus "reassures young people that they are not first in the world to have faced the problems" (Kiefer & Tyson, 2010, p. 188).

In talking with GCBA conference attendees, Johnson mused that some of the inspirations for her stories originate from moments of wonder while she is observing life. Her acclaimed novel in verse, *The First Part Last*, evolved from one such experience. "[T]here was this beautiful kid," Johnson explained in an interview with [TeachingBooks.net \(2005\)](#). "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?" From here, Johnson's interest was piqued. She took up the role of activist in recounting the unsung story of a young man's experience of fatherhood.



Offering a counter narrative to the common stories of single teen moms, *The First Part Last* won both the Michael L. Printz and Coretta Scott King book awards in 2004. In the words of one [Teenreads.com reviewer Norah Piehl \(2003\)](#) Johnson's award-winning prose offers "an all too-rare portrayal of a caring, nurturing young man." Written in a non-linear format that alternates between the end and beginning of the story, Johnson suggests that *The First Part Last* is a "cautionary tale" ([TeachingBooks.net, 2005](#)), although it is in no way didactic. After navigating the complexities of girlfriend Nia's pregnancy, the protagonist Bobby is left alone with their baby. Instead of giving his daughter for adoption, he accepts his role as a young father and embarks on a journey of self-discovery that transforms his perspectives on life.

Johnson says, "I want to connect" with readers by cultivating untold tales like Bobby's, and hopes her voice is one readers "can count on for a good story and maybe even take away something that might hold them in good stead" ([TheBrownBookshelf.com, 2009](#)). Connecting

with readers is the hallmark of Johnsons' activism via picturebooks and novels. For more information about Angela Johnson's award-winning books, visit her [Ohioana Author webpage](#).

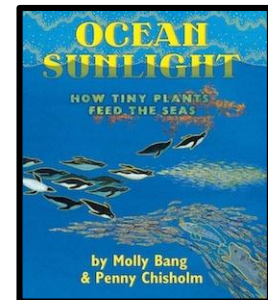
Molly Bang: Re-Envisioning Readers' Access to Science

Displaying dazzling images of light from her picturebooks [My Light](#) (2004), [Living Sunlight](#) (2009), and [Ocean Sunlight](#) (2012), Molly Bang discussed her deliberate and thoughtful approach to creating visual art and narrative text for children. Considering herself fortunate to "see how certain elements in pictures effect our feelings, as she states in *Picture This: How Pictures Work* (1991, p. 6), Bang took up the role of activist and called on GCBA conference attendees to examine picturebooks as multimodal texts.

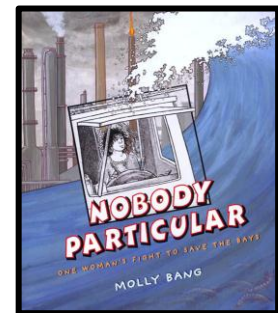


[Molly Bang](#)

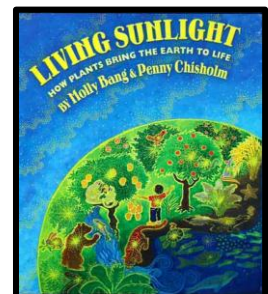
Bang also explained that as an advocate of fostering children's multiple literacies she has been concerned about U.S. children's limited understanding of basic science principles. Thus, she continues to publish nonfiction picturebooks to support science literacy. One such book, *Ocean Sunlight* (2012), is her sixth book focused on science literacy and was coauthored with MIT ecologist Penny Chisholm. This book talks about tiny phytoplankton that floats in the sea and produces oxygen gas, while transferring the sun's energy to all marine life. Bang's advocacy has received national acclaim. Most recently, she has been two-time award winner (2010 and 2013) of the [American Association for the Advancement of Science \(AAAS\)/Subaru Science Book and Film Prize](#) for Excellence in Science Books for *Ocean Sunlight* (2012) and *Living Sunlight* (2009).



Bang also seeks to "make books about people who make a difference," as illustrated in her graphic novel, *Nobody Particular: One Woman's Fight to Save the Bays* (2000). In this book, Bang tells the story of Dianne Wilson, a Gulf of Texas shrimper-turned-environmental activist who stood up to the chemical plants responsible for the horrific ground pollution in Calhoun County, Texas. Using a vivid collage technique, Bang creates two narratives. One narrative describes the bay habitat, its living beings, and the pollution and protection of the shore and waters. The other narrative represents Diane Wilson's quest to learn about the origins of the environmental pollution in the Gulf of Texas and across the U.S. and her dedication to do something about it.



Despite Bang's current focus on science, her beloved Caldecott Honor picturebook, [When Sophie Gets Angry-Really, Really Angry](#) (1999), remains ever popular. With silver ink, Molly Bang generously personalized and signed as many copies of this childhood favorite for GCBA conference attendees as her new award winners. For more information about Molly Bang's projects and literacy activism, be sure to visit her [website](#).



Pat Mora: Promoting Bookjoy and Literacy across the Globe

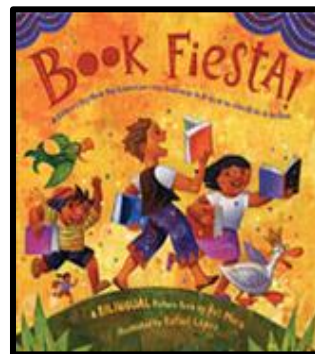


[Pat Mora](#)

Finally, renowned poet, author, and literacy advocate [Pat Mora](#) encouraged participants of the GCBA conference to be literacy activists as readers and writers who share their joy of books with children. In fact, so impressed by a teacher she met over breakfast, Mora paused her presentation to ask this conference participant tell other attendees about her approach to creating stories with young students. Such is the mind of an activist: always noticing what stories to share, when to share them and ensuring multiple voices are heard.

Mora is the founder of the family literacy initiative [El Día de Los Libros, the Day of the Books](#), which she calls Día. Established 17 years ago in 1996, Día is an extension of the Mexican holiday El Día de Los Niños.

In the words of [Booklist Online](#), Mora's bilingual picturebook about Día, *Book Fiesta! Celebrate Children's Day/Book Day; Celebremos El día de los niños/El día de los libros* (2009), "exhorts everyone to read and have fun in whatever language and locale they choose... The straightforward, bilingual text in Spanish and English is beautifully illustrated in bright, bold, acrylic paintings..." Within this picturebook, Mora offers encouragement and ideas for celebrating books and fostering [Bookjoy](#), the pleasure of reading, within communities among families, schools, libraries, and other community groups. Her suggestions are not only for El Día de Los Libros on April 30, but for any and every day. Internationally, Mora's message of Bookjoy was recently honored for the [2013 International Children's Book Day \(ICBD\)](#), an event that celebrates the love of reading worldwide.



In addition to promoting Día, Mora has the tremendous gift of writing in two languages for ALL readers. At least seven of her children's books are bilingual (English and Spanish) and ten are available in both English and Spanish versions. Mora advocates that our diverse students need brave teachers and suggests that teacher and teacher educators can:

- affirm our Latino and Spanish-speaking students by incorporating bilingual books into our school and library collections and by using the books for read-alouds and activities;
- teach by example, when we leave our linguistic comfort zone and risk beginning to explore and maybe even learn another language, we teach our students, whether monolingual or bilingual, to do likewise; and/or
- partner with bilingual parents, older students or colleagues and illustrate the wonder and fun of languages through collaboration.

To learn more about Pat Mora's advocacy and literature for children and adults, visit her [website](#).

Conclusion

Four renowned authors participated in the Georgia Children's Book Award conference. Each of these women demonstrated that there are multiple approaches to cultivating literacy through children's literature. Deborah Wiles and Angela Johnson are interested in releasing stories into the world that feature characters and perspectives, which are not commonly regarded in dominant U.S. culture. Both show that stories need not follow a traditional linear format to be accessible to readers. Meanwhile, author-illustrator Molly Bang is as much an activist of science and ecological literacies as she is an activist of visual literacy through her creation of multimodal picturebooks. Finally, Pat Mora, is not only a writer of dual languages and cultures but also a tireless activist for literacy through *Bookjoy* and *Día*. Collectively, the creative projects these authors cultivate nourish the readers, writers, and activist in all of us.

If you are interested in meeting award-winning authors, learning about new children's books and media, and engaging in a variety of conversations and break-out sessions with fellow children's book enthusiasts, the GCBA organization invites you to attend the 45th conference in spring 2014. A call for session proposals will be announced in the fall. JoLLE readers are especially encouraged to submit proposals to the research strand of the 2014 conference. For more information about featured authors and events of past, present and future conference, please the [GCBA website](#).

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