



*The library became the place where I could think, create, share, and grow as a reader and, later, as a writer.*

# Falling through the Cracks

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LIBRARIES TO LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

**Angela Shanté Johnson**

Libraries hold a special place in my heart as someone who grew up in a single parent, low-income household. School and public libraries were where I first fell in love with storytelling and would be instrumental in molding me into a writer.

I grew up in the South Bronx, the middle child of a mother who was an educational advocate and lifelong learner. Our house was always filled with literature, arts, and culture, not because we had disposable income, the means, or access to these luxuries, but because my mother knew they were important to raising conscious and well-rounded Black children in America. And because we couldn't afford a large home library or computer, she utilized the local

public library and school library to make sure we were connected to the larger world and had access to all its possibilities.

Every week my family trekked to the local public library where we would spend hours rummaging through stacks of books and using the computers. My mother knew then something that I did not; she knew

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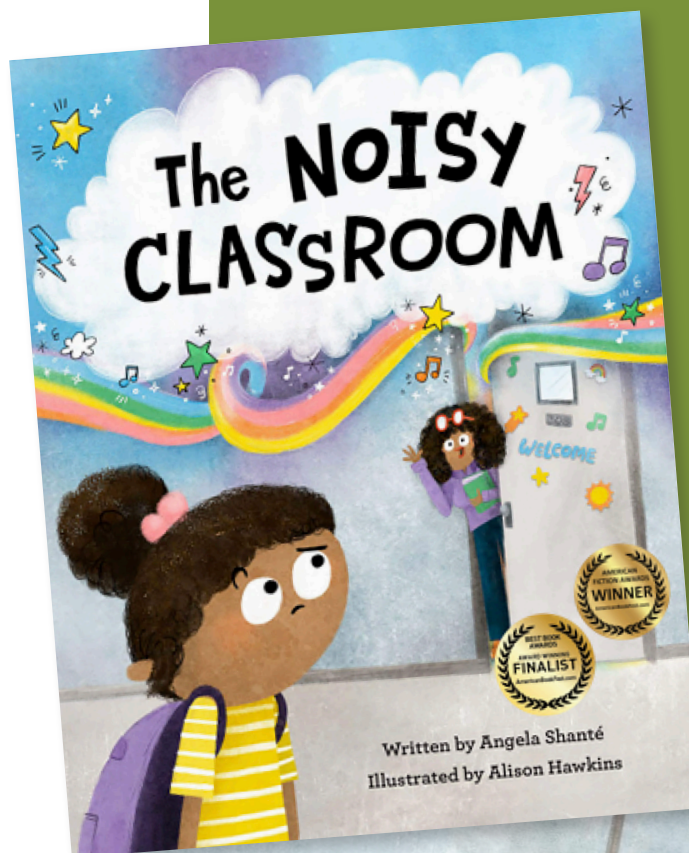
that being competent adults meant literacy had to be a daily part of our lives, and she would make sure we had access to books and resources to make this happen.

At the time I used reading as a means of escaping, a chance to visit worlds beyond my own. But there was always a disconnect to my reading. Sure, I was an avid reader and could be

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found on any given day with my head in a book for hours, but reading was more procedural than passion. I wanted to read stories where Black girls went on adventures to different planets, I wanted to pick up fantasy books and see a Black girl as the heroine. I wanted stories beyond the school curriculum, which mostly included literature and text around the themes of Black struggle, Black oppression, Black tokenism, and/or Black death. At the library I could choose what I wanted to read.

When I was old enough to travel to the library alone, I often visited the library to read and complete any homework assignment that required computer or Internet access. The library became the place where I could think, create, share, and grow as a reader and, later, as a writer. I owe much of my love for literature to the tenacity of the librarians as well. They had an uncanny ability to suggest books that would feed my curiosity while opening my mind to worlds beyond the borough of the Bronx. Before I could identify what type of books I enjoyed reading, I leaned into the suggestions made by librarians as my jumping off point.



It was because of these curated lists that I was introduced to the Black authors and poets who would shape my literary identity as a writer.

When I later became a teacher in the South Bronx, one of the first things I did was to take my students to the local library to register for library cards. I wanted to pass my mother's ritual down to my students, many of whom were growing up in the same neighborhood I was raised in. But while my mother and I shared similar views on literacy accessibility, the administration at my school did not.

State testing had begun and everyone was feeling the weight of the new Common Core standards. The school administration team

worried that the time away from the classroom could be better utilized preparing students to meet state standards and passing the end-of-year assessments. But, like any good educator, I advocated for my students. I rationalized that many of my students did not have access to home computers or the research resources required to effectively meet new standards. Eventually I was granted permission and used the trips to the library to immerse my students in wider texts beyond the curriculum we were handed.

As we head into another uncertain year, library visits will look very different. With the transition to virtual/dual learning, many school libraries are closed and public

libraries are running at low capacity (if open at all). During these times I think about the young reader who, much like myself, has an enjoyment for reading, but no access to purchase physical copies of books. I think about low-income families and marginalized communities who rely on libraries to access the Internet, research databases, and literature for their children. Families, much like my own, who now have to make the hard decision between access to education or, potentially, falling through the cracks.

**Angela Johnson** is the award-winning author of *The Noisy Classroom*, a book about her time as a teacher. She has more than 15 years of experience as a classroom teacher, reading specialist, and educational/curriculum consultant. She has a Master's in elementary education with a focus on curriculum planning and emergent literacy. She also has an MFA in creative writing. Angela writes under the pen name Angela Shanté (pronounced shawn-tay) and currently lives in southern California with her husband and dog.



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