

Buzzing with Stories

A Visit with Author, Librarian, Teacher Janice N. Harrington

MOLLY MACRAE



Janice N. Harrington

"If someone listens to you, then your words have value, and you also believe that your lived experience has value."

—Janice N. Harrington

Vernon, Alabama, 1962, before breakfast on a school day

Cast-iron skillets clatter on the woodburning stove. Do you hear them? That's the sound six-year-old Janice loves waking up to. She follows it to the kitchen where her grandmother makes biscuits. Janice watches the sifting and mixing and, while her grandmother works, Janice tells her stories. The one about a dog with a big bone who stops on a bridge and sees another dog with a bone looking back. Then the one about the terrible monster in Rabbit's house (it's a bee).

"I'd tell her stories and she'd ask questions or laugh or 'mm-hm,'" Harrington says. "And sometimes she'd start pounding that dough until flour flew everywhere! My stories literally filled the air, and I loved it!"

Harrington still loves making the flour fly. She writes acclaimed picture books, middle grade fiction, picture book biographies, and award-winning poetry. She's received an NEA Literature Fellowship for Poetry and a Guggenheim Fellowship. She's been a public schoolteacher, children's librarian, professional storyteller, and now she's a professor of creative writing at the University of Illinois. Her love for stories and the human connections they create are the common

threads you can follow like a string of biscuit crumbs from her grandmother's kitchen through all her adventures since then.

Follow that string to the stories Harrington hears her mother tell—stories spun from her mother's memories and told over and over—with Harrington listening every time. Instead of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," Harrington got, "How I Learned to Drive." She retells a short version like this.

My mother ran over her parents' house with a flatbed truck when she was learning to drive. Or, I should say, when she taught *herself* to drive. Her father bought the truck to haul pine logs and decided to teach his sons to drive it but not his daughter. He simply didn't want his only daughter to get hurt. Well—the idea! Her brothers could learn to drive but she couldn't? *Unbearable!*

So, my mother took matters into her own hands. Every time her father gave a lesson, she tagged along. She watched closely, paid attention, and after a couple of weeks she



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decided she was ready. That's how, at fourteen, my mother ran over her parent's house with the flatbed truck.

Her mother, hearing the noise and feeling the shudder, ran out to discover the truck on her front porch and used the words that strike terror into the heart of any teenage girl—"Get that truck down and get it down now or *I'm telling your daddy!*" And, in the distance, it looked like she saw her daddy coming. Well, my mother ground those gears into place, backed that truck off the porch, drove it down the road, turned around, brought it back, and parked it. It's at this point in the story my mother always says, "And I've been drivin' ever since."

That story came back to Harrington when she reached a difficult point in her own life, and she realized the story taught her what she had to do. In life, we always end up somewhere we didn't expect to be, or we come to a complete stop. That's when we get our own driving lessons—we learn to start up again, shift gears, or head in a new direction. By listening to her mother's stories from childhood, through adolescence to adulthood, they've become more than anecdotes to Harrington; they're stories that nurture.

Her first two picture books are personal, poetic, and full of sound pictures as well as energetic illustrations. With *The Chicken Chasing Queen of Lamar County*, you can follow the string of biscuit crumbs back to her grandmother's farm where Janice loved chasing the chickens. They'd flap their wings and run with a *puh-quawkkkkk!* Her grandmother would call out the back door, asking if she was chasing those chickens. "And just like the girl in the book," Harrington says, "I'd lie." In *Going North*, we listen to the rhythm of the tires on a Black family's car carrying them through the segregated south to a new home in Lincoln, Nebraska. In the summer of 1964, Harrington's family made that journey north in search of better jobs and a better life for her and her younger brother and sister.

In Nebraska, she discovered something else budding storytellers need—books. Her father took her to her first library, a tiny Carnegie in Lincoln. The idea that she could walk into a building and walk out with any book she wanted was . . . "there aren't words," she says now, "but let's say magic."

But she wasn't really a reader until fifth grade when she got sick and had to stay in bed. You might imagine her flour-flying complaints when her mother refused to release her from that sickbed. Harrington had a copy of *Jane Eyre* from the library, though, and she stayed put and read it, falling in love with the story and totally identifying with Jane.

"You don't know what's going to save you in life or lead you to your passion," Harrington says. Brontë's classic saved her by giving her powerful information. Not all books are the same. "The light went on," she says. "*Oh*. Some books are *good*. I have to find the good ones."

That's how the string of biscuit crumbs led to library school at the University of Iowa and a career of public library service. Ask Harrington why she chose working with children over adults and you'll get the best answer—"Fun!"

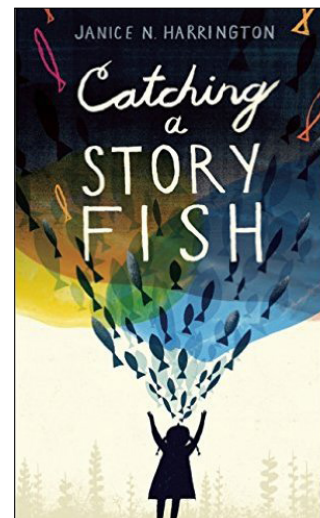
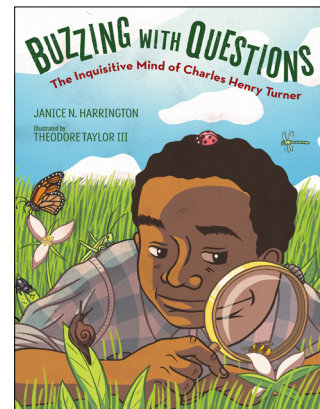
The job used every part of her creativity. That worked for her, and it definitely worked for the children and families she touched for several years at the Urbana (IL) Free Library and for many more years managing the children's department at the Champaign (IL) Public Library. While building the children's literature collections, Harrington read Mildred D. Taylor's inspiring *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, a book that shaped her professional commitment to put diverse books into children's hands.

For Harrington, it was a natural path from loving stories and books to writing them. She started in sixth grade, writing a story that her father submitted to a contest. She won honorable mention and when she received a certificate, she framed it and hung it on the wall. The certificate yellowed over the years, and she says that taught her something about fame. That early writing experience led to her beautiful verse novel *Catching a Storyfish*.

Throughout her life, Harrington has looked for the lessons and the nurturing in stories. She used that technique in her picture book biography *Buzzing with Questions: The Inquisitive Mind of Charles Henry Turner*. The book illustrates how she examines the small stories that make up other people's lives and turns them into joyful, meaningful, flour-flying adventures for her readers.

Harrington believes in mentors—someone who believes in *you* and says yes. In the first and only class in African American literature she's taken, she had an instructor whose opinion she valued, so she gave the instructor her poems. Sheets and sheets of them. The instructor put tick marks next to the poems she liked and handed them back. She gave no explanation for why she liked the ones she did, and none for the ones she didn't, but Harrington lived for the tick marks. The instructor gave her a yes with each one.

"Kids, human beings, need a yes," Harrington says. "That's so important. And all along the way I've had that. The scariest



thing of all is to believe in yourself or to believe that you can succeed.”

For children, some of that belief comes in finding the books that are mirrors as well as windows. Harrington’s books, which feature children and families of color, are among those.

“Today, we have amazing Black children’s authors,” she says. “Christopher Paul Curtis, Nikki Grimes, Jacqueline Woodson, Kwame Alexander, Varian Johnson—the list goes on, but we need more. Not just more stories featuring African Americans,

but books that reflect all of America’s vibrant cultural and religious diversity. When children see themselves in the stories they read, they know their lives have value. It’s the *yes* they need to start telling their own stories. If reading a book or poem I’ve written gets a child to read another book, or to write or tell someone a story, then I’ve done my job as a writer.”

May all children find their voices and fill mornings with the rhythm of biscuits and a haze of flour. May their voices, and the stories they tell, draw the people they love closer, listening to every word. &

Push PLAY on Podcasts

Renée Cogan

Renée Cogan is a Children’s Assistant Librarian at the Melrose (MA) Public Library, a part of the North Boston Library Exchange, and a member of the Kidcast Discussion Group.

At the Melrose (MA) Public Library, our monthly book club for second and third graders was well attended. But when the pandemic hit, we continued virtually, but kids weren’t as engaged. We knew our program, in its original form, didn’t translate well online, so I explored other options to engage young kids in literacy-based programming.

A 2017 *Children and Libraries* article on podcasts inspired me, giving me a roadmap for transforming our book club into a podcast club.¹

Since listening is such an integral part of literacy-based learning, podcasts made sense because most were free, easily accessible, playable on-demand, and many shows covered topics of high interest.

Finding the right content would be key. I used trusted sources, like Kids Listen (kidslisten.org), a grassroots nonprofit dedicated to high-quality audio for kids, and librarian-curated lists. My criteria for selection included shows with local connections, interactive formats, and kid perspectives. Once the episodes were selected, I reached out to some creators and invited them to join our program via Zoom.

We listened to the episodes together and either responded to what we heard or engaged with podcast hosts. Such experiences could not have happened in person, so it opened our minds to stories from near and far.

Each month, we had about a dozen kids attend, making our online program as successful as our in-person book club. Now, as we reopen our libraries, we still encourage families to keep hitting play on podcasts.

My podcast club journey opened my mind, connected me with those in my community and beyond, and encouraged me to listen, learn, and share stories with kids. Not a bad thing during a pandemic!

Reference

1. Kitty Felde and Pamela Rogers, “Now Playing . . . : Using Podcasts and Kidcasts in the Library,” *Children & Libraries* 15, no. 2 (2017): 9–12, <https://doi.org/10.5860/ccl.15n2.09>.