
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

ANGELS MAKE
THEIR HOPE HERE

by

Breena Clarke

An online version of this reading group guide can be found at littlebrown.com.

A Conversation with Breena Clarke

What was your first inspiration for Angels Make Their Hope Here? Did you have any inspirations later in your writing process that changed the way you had originally imagined the book?

I first got interested in imagining *Angels Make Their Hope Here* when I happened upon a small book about a mixed-race settlement in New York's Ramapo Mountains. Inquiring about these people led me to discover a lot more about the African American presence throughout the Mid-Atlantic. I began reading first-person slave narratives published mostly in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. I was and continue to be fascinated with the lives of people who self-emancipated from slavery.

Dossie, your protagonist, is one of the few characters not born in Russell's Knob. She is very young at the start of her northward journey — too young to fully understand where her parents are sending her but old enough to know that she must depend on strangers for survival as she is passed from conductor to conductor along the way. In what ways did you want to capture the impact of slavery on her life while also remaining true to the fact that she is still a child?

The most damaging aspect of the institution of slavery is the destruction of familial relationships through separation and

the inability of enslaved parents to protect their children. It is in the interest of preserving families that the people of Russell's Knob built a community—preferring to live apart from the mainstream in order to stay together with loved ones. Parenting in the time of slavery was necessarily fraught with peril. Dossie's parents did the most difficult thing imaginable. They sent their child off to uncertainty rather than have her suffer as an enslaved person on the Kenworthy plantation. They embraced a hope that, with the help of others, she could become free and live a better life. For them, the “knowable horror” of the Kenworthy plantation was worth risking their child's life and separating from her forever. The life of an enslaved child held no guarantee that she would not be involuntarily separated from her mother and father. She might be sold, she might be put to work on another plantation, she might be beaten, she might be raped, she might be killed. The only certainty in her life was that the people who loved her could not protect her. They could only facilitate her escape.

Also, it was very important to me that the enslaved people not be passive actors in the emancipation of Dossie. I've read many autobiographical escape accounts and narratives and realized that the people who succeeded in escaping slavery—self-emancipating—were bold, cunning, clever, and lucky. The popular depiction of the slave mother is, forced onto the auction block, she reaches for her children with arms outstretched, pleading, crying, helpless, collapsed in the dust. Evidently there were those who made the preemptive decision.

There are a lot of different parents, and types of parenting, in Angels.

I think *Angels Make Their Hope Here* is a novel about parenthood. I'd like to think that my large-topic theme centers on this question: Who are the progenitors of our United States? The parents in *Angels Make Their Hope Here* make bold decisions. One of the boldest is Ernst Wilhelm's — to take his pregnant mistress to Canada rather than to see mother and child sold south. With this decision, he forfeits not only his privileges as a white man but most of his wealth and comfort in Russell's Knob as well. Once again, a parent is forced to decide between uncertainty and a knowable horror.

The people of Russell's Knob are, by and large, a skilled and literate group. While literacy is an accomplishment that many persons of color are punished for or are compelled to conceal during this time period, in Russell's Knob the tradition of the written word is a given. Can you talk about your choice to present a culture of literacy without making it a focus of the story?

For African Americans, especially those who experienced enslavement, the ticket to being free and remaining free was the acquisition of literacy. Because they are survivalists, the people of Russell's Knob consider education in the dominant European language, English, an important tool for survival. The African and Native American ancestors of these people were not blank slates before European contact, either in Africa or in the Americas. They were fluent in the languages of trade among themselves, and they would have considered it vital to teach their children the European languages. In Russell's Knob the people educate and train their children in systematic ways because it is the best way to ensure survival. Though it is

largely a patriarchal society, there is respect for the courage and intelligence of women. I chose to structure the people of Russell's Knob in a matrilineal tradition so that I could imagine a society that drew upon the strength of women as well as men.

It isn't always clear to the reader what race some of the main characters are. Was that intentional? I'm wondering if Duncan Smoot, for instance, is a free black man.

I wanted to leave certain questions of identity open. Readers of fiction bring their own ideas about racial identity and national origin to the page. In certain genre fiction a kind of racial shorthand is used and readers are given clues. I like to thwart that a bit.

You would rather it be ambiguous?

Oh, no. I really don't want to make up your mind. I know you'll come to a decision. We Americans always do. I think the word *amalgamation*, which is employed most of the time as a derisive term in descriptions of people, can inform a more inclusive worldview of what a mixed-race identity is. I think what you'd find among the people of Russell's Knob is that they have managed to bring strength and survival skills from all of their ancestors and forge them to make a strong whole. To me, that's amalgamation. I think it's a positive concept for a multiracial, multinational, inclusive society.

Both Jan Smoot and Petrus Wilhelm have European-sounding names. What do their names say about them or their history? Are they nods toward their heritage, or something else?

Both of these young men are what might be described as mixed-race, if what we mean is an individual whose parents belong to two different races according to the widely accepted ideas about race in this country. Jan's skin color is described as appearing dark relative to the paler European skin colors. Pet has the same pale-white skin as his father, and outside the context of his home he appears to be of entirely European heritage. In Russell's Knob, the advantages that white skin can afford are mitigated by a deep tradition of inclusiveness, respect, and appreciation for African and Native American culture. I intended their surnames, first names, and "sweet" names to be sort of polyglot as, in fact, most of our American names are.

There are so many untold stories in American historical literature, and even pivotal moments like the New York City draft riots tend to get overlooked in favor of more simplified dichotomies of North vs. South, slavery vs. freedom. What sorts of historical details call out to you as a writer?

The most exciting part of researching and writing historical fiction is being immersed in a particular period or place. I find the nineteenth century breathtakingly exciting because of the crucial importance of the century in the history of African American people. I also simply admire a number of people who lived in the nineteenth century. This interest has everything to do with the significant number of autobiographies and biographies of formerly enslaved people that cover the horrific events of the enslavement institutions. I think it is important to make an important distinction: the women, men, children, people, were "enslaved." I prefer to use the term this way so that it denotes a condition rather than a description—a kind of shorthand. This

use also puts the onus on the person who enslaved another person. Yes, people were born into enslavement, but no person was or is born a slave.

The dialogue between characters in Angels Make Their Hope Here is inflected with the slang of the time, but the language also feels specific to the characters and their world. How much of it came out of your research, and how much was your creation?

Again I'd say that I learned a lot from reading slave narratives and newspapers of the period. And because I had the freedom to imagine my characters' day-to-day lives, I gave myself the license to invent a few idiosyncratic terms. I consulted other works of fiction and dictionaries of period slang. Then, too, certain of the novel's very opinionated and eccentric characters seemed to be whispering phrases to me.

Are there historical events that you didn't include but wish people knew more about?

I wish there had been a way for me to include information about black immigration to Canada before and after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. In fact, I believe that there is fundamental ignorance of and misunderstanding about the travails faced by blacks after the passage of this law in 1850. The effects were profound upon free blacks north of the Mason-Dixon Line. In abject fear for their lives and their freedom, many crossed the Canadian border.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. *Angels Make Their Hope Here* is threaded through with events that surround the Civil War, like Dossie's passage via the Underground Railroad and the draft riots, but the story is separate from the war itself. How has the book expanded your knowledge of the period and opened your mind to different ideas about what life was like in the nineteenth century?
2. Russell's Knob is "a hide, a hush-up, a keep-quiet-about spot," its own hidden world within the greater surround. In what ways do its inhabitants hide from the outside world—and how are they very much present in it?
3. Would you consider Russell's Knob to be a utopian community? Why or why not?
4. Duncan is many things to Dossie—a man, a god, her savior, and her husband. In what ways does their relationship change over the course of the book? Why do you think she falls in love with him—and how does her perception of him change when she returns from New York? How did your perception of him change as his relationship with Dossie shifts?

5. Duncan's work is not always clear—though we know he is a smuggler of goods, a seller of cigars, a conductor on the Underground Railroad, and a protector of the People in Russell's Knob. Is he a good man or a bad man? Can he be both?
6. Duncan decides to call Dossie "Bird" when finalizing the papers at their wedding ceremony. What is the significance of birds in Dossie's life?
7. Duncan thinks to himself, "The pretty one is not responsible for her own prettiness. It is an accident of nature. She can't be credited or blamed for it" (page 41). Dossie's beauty both protects her and imperils her. In what ways does it bring events upon her that she does not ask for or deserve? In what ways does this create uniquely nineteenth-century problems for her, and in what ways do women in the twenty-first century still face the same problems?
8. Noelle and Duncan have an on-again, off-again relationship, and it is said that they would never fully commit to each other. Why do you think that is? How are Duncan's feelings for Dossie different than they are for Noelle?
9. How do Dossie's feelings for Jan change over the course of the book? How is her love for Jan different from her love for Duncan?
10. Early in the book Noelle tells Dossie that "all gods are welcome here." How would you define religion in Russell's

Knob? How does the people's belief in the Grandmothers, and the ancestors, define their lives?

11. Jan's name is not originally Jan. It is changed for him after his mother is killed. What meaning do names, and sweet names, have for the characters in *Angels Make Their Hope Here*?
12. Many point out that Pet could "pass" for white if he wanted to, but Duncan and Hat fight for him to stay in Russell's Knob and thus not be identified solely as his father's son. At the end of the book, Pet rejects his father's gift of a new birth certificate and states that he will never try to pass. Is it a difficult decision for him or one he had made long before his father's offer?
13. Though he is a purchaser of slaves, Ernst Wilhelm commits murder to protect the freedom of his unborn child and his mistress. He also sacrifices much of his wealth and gives up his home in Russell's Knob. Did his parental choices surprise you?
14. In the slang of Russell's Knob, a "dossie" is considered a found luck for a man, and a "jimmer" is a found luck for a woman. Is Dossie a found luck for Duncan?
15. Emil Branch's attack on Dossie makes it clear just how precarious the freedom of a black woman was before the Civil War. While she and Jan are ensconced in Five Points, Dossie asks herself, "Had she passed from Duncan's

pocket into Jan's then? It was a hazard to become the pocket floss of one man or another" (page 235). In what ways was the protection of a man both necessary and problematic for women—especially black women—in the nineteenth century? How is Dossie ultimately able to find her independence?