

Author Spotlight with ANNE BROYLES



As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

I was a desert child, a bit of a tomboy who loved making forts in the desert or entertaining in the outdoor playhouse my father built. Peter Pan, Davy Crockett, Albert Schweitzer, the Knights of the Round Table, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the women in my extended family were my heroes. All of them fought against injustice in real life or in books. Davy Crockett spoke out against the Indian Removal Bill that caused the Trail of Tears, for instance. I expected to “save the world” when I grew up. My mother always told me, “You can do anything,” and I believed her.

How did you become a writer?

Although I loved to write from the time I was young, I never considered writing as a career because I never knew a “real writer” personally. In high school I focused on becoming a concert pianist and an actress, but felt either of those career choices would have limited my use of other interests and skills. I chose to become a United Methodist minister, because it seemed to combine my artistic skill, speaking ability, passion for justice, love of people, and aptitude for counseling. I didn’t think of writing as a way to make money, but as a means of communication. At seminary graduation a friend of mine asked, “Will you write to me?” “Of course, Eddie, I’ll write!” I responded as he drove away, forgetting that he was becoming a magazine editor in Nashville and was not looking for a personal correspondence. My first payment for writing was for an article called “How Are Your Ethics?” for Eddie’s magazine.

That assignment led to more articles, to books of curriculum, and to my first book, *Journaling: A Spirit Journey* (Upper Room Books). I incorporated writing as part of my ministry career until it became increasingly difficult to make writing deadlines and provide pastoral care in the way I wanted. One day I was at my computer, focusing on an impending deadline, when I received a phone call from the mother of a twenty-one-year old who had just overdosed on heroin and alcohol. Of course, I left the computer and went straight to the hospital, where I spent much of the next thirteen days until Bridgette was taken off life support. Each day, when I went home from the hospital, I was still faced with the looming deadline, so I worked into the night to complete that work, all while trying to mother two young children as well. I felt the push and pull of conflicting needs during that extremely emotional time leading up to Bridgette’s death.



The next year, I had an emergency life-saving surgery. Eight days in the hospital gave me time to look at my life and ponder, “If I die, who will write the stories that are in my head?” Within months, I’d decided to take early retirement from the church so I could focus on writing children’s literature. I also write devotional books and high school church youth group curricula, but my passion is writing for children and young adults.



How do your experiences from childhood inform your writing today?

My many vivid memories of childhood inform the way I write about my characters’ feelings and understanding of their world, even though I have not yet included any actual events from my life experience in my writing. The fact that I grew up appreciating my Cherokee heritage from a tender age caused some awkward moments in writing Priscilla’s story, since it was a Cherokee master with whom Priscilla went on the Trail of Tears. I tried to portray the Cherokees in as positive a light as possible and to humanize the brutal dislocation of their journey.

You were struck by the story of Priscilla while doing research for another book. Why do you think her story is translatable to children’s literature? In what ways do you think she will affect children?

Any kind of oppression does not touch us personally until we connect with a person in that situation. I can talk vaguely about the wrongs of slavery or sweatshop labor, but until I come face to face with another human being who is forced to live in those conditions, I can keep myself at a remove. Priscilla was a real child who bore grief, was discounted, and was treated as less than human through no fault of her character, but only because of the time into which she was born. She does not represent all slaves or their experiences, but her life gives us a glimpse into what slave children might have endured (though because it is a picture book, I did not include the worst of possible realities). We see her as a person of emotional depth who manages to find strength in adversity. We root for her. And when in the end her own courage helps bring about a new life, we cheer her on.

I hope young readers will recognize the deep joy that Priscilla feels at the end of the book. Anna’s final painting shows such deep contentment on Priscilla’s face. The reader feels the heat of the sunshine, smells the flowers, and connects with a young woman who has found a new life. I also hope that sometime when a young reader finds him- or herself in a tough situation, they might remember how Priscilla never surrendered hope.

In *Priscilla and the Hollyhocks* the language is rich with dialect and colloquialisms. What was your process in writing this type of language? How did you ensure its accuracy?

When I first sat down to write *Priscilla and the Hollyhocks*, the dialect flowed out of me and almost scared me. Where were these words coming from? I’d type a line or two, get up and walk around the house in nervous energy, then plop back down in front of the computer to write another couple of lines. Priscilla’s voice was clear. There was no conscious moment of deciding to write in dialect; the colloquialisms just came. That’s why I later read numerous books like *Before Freedom: When I Just Can Remember* (John F. Blair Publisher), a compilation of Federal Writers’ Project oral histories of former slaves. Because someone like Priscilla was unable to write her own story, I’ve had to depend on language “possibilities.” The word for the male slave owner, for instance has been transcribed as Massa, Marster, and Master. I had trouble even having to write the words coming out of Priscilla’s

mouth (no matter how it was spelled) because the idea of a human being owning another human is so repugnant to me. Yet slavery and being “owned” was Priscilla’s reality.

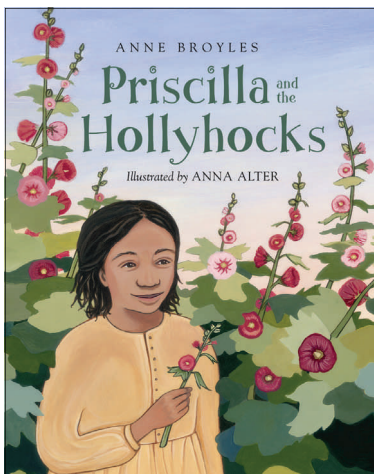
I emailed with several academics about this one word, and finally had to accept the reality, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. wrote, that “It may be offensive to some African Americans, but you are not endorsing the word, or slavery, by using a term that is historically sound: you are merely being responsible to the history of the times.”

All writers make choices about language that may or may not be totally accurate, especially if they write outside of their own time or culture. I tried to be as accurate as possible while understanding that without a neutrally written historical record (i.e., Priscilla’s own words in her own handwriting) I had to trust her voice as it came to and through me.

Priscilla carries hollyhock seeds with her wherever she goes to remind her of home. If you could carry something with you to remember home, what would it be?

I’m a visually oriented person and take lots of photographs. Our home is filled with framed photos of family and friends. One large closet contains the library of all of the photo albums I’ve kept from college on. I am a bit obsessive about documenting our family’s life so we remember the many people and experiences that shaped who we are. If I knew ahead of time that I could only choose one thing, I’d make a photo collage of the people who give me emotional strength. If I had to grab something on the spur of the moment, I’d probably choose an old photo of my mother, Wanda Sutherlin Broyles, when she was about four years old. The grin on her face would help me feel at home anywhere I went. So I guess I’m like Priscilla in that respect—no surprise I chose hollyhocks to represent (her) Ma and “home.”

Books by Anne Broyles



ISBN: 978-1-57091-675-5 • HC • \$15.95
Ages 7–10

Based on a true story, *Priscilla and the Hollyhocks* follows a young slave girl named Priscilla from her early years on a Southern plantation to her forced march along the Trail of Tears to the chance encounter that leads to her freedom.

"Priscilla and the Hollyhocks tells a story too often ignored or overlooked—a story of how the west was not won but captured. Reading about Priscilla's remarkable life makes all our hearts a bit warmer while filling our heads with a much-needed piece of American history."

— Nikki Giovanni, poet