READING GROUP GUIDE

**About the book**
What happens when you discover that you aren't who you always thought you were? In this lyrical novel, winner of the Coretta Scott King Award, fourteen-year-old Marley lives in a small Ohio town called Heaven. For Marley, it is nearly a paradise. She has parents who love her, friends who support her, and even a mysterious uncle who sends her the most wonderful notes. But her life is upended one day when a letter arrives from a little church in Alabama. Suddenly, in Marley's eyes anyway, Momma and Pops are liars, wandering Uncle Jack is a greater mystery than ever, and Marley is desperate to make sense of what it means to be a family. Sparely written and achingly felt, this richly acclaimed novel, as *Booklist* observes, "Makes us see the power of loving kindness."
**Discussion Questions**

* + Marley lives in the town of Heaven, Ohio. What is heavenly about the place? What isn't? What mood does the author establish by choosing Heaven as the name for Marley's hometown and as the title for this novel? Would you want to live in Heaven, Ohio? Why or why not?
	+ Explore the character of Jack, the man Marley thought was her uncle. Why do you think he drifts around the country? Why does he always name his dogs "Boy"? What are his hopes? What are his fears?
	+ Unlike Jack, Bobby is raising his child by himself. Do you think he made a more responsible decision than Jack? Why or why not?
	+ Marley doesn't ask her friends about their past. "The past," she says, "doesn't always make sense of the present." What does she mean by that? Do you agree that it's true for all the characters in this novel? For example, does Jack's past help explain his present way of life?
	+ This novel begins with the story of a dream, and many other dreams are described during its course. Discuss the importance of dreams in Heaven. What do they reveal about the dreamers? How do they shape the tone of this novel?
	+ "Maybe the one big lie makes everything a lie," Marley says to Pops. Do you agree? If someone lies to you, can you ever believe him or her again? Are all lies bad? Should some be forgiven?
	+ How does Marley's understanding of the Maple family change over time? Why do you think Shoogy dislikes her family so much? Why does she cut herself? What is behind Mrs. Maple's seemingly perfect facade?
	+ Marley is furious at Momma and Pops for waiting until she was fourteen years old to tell her the truth about her birth. Is her anger justified? Should she have been told earlier? Why or why not?
	+ How do Momma and Pops respond to Marley's anger? Why do they give her the "Baby Mond" box? How does Butchy react to the news? What does he mean when he says to her, "We'll always be who we were to each other."
	+ What makes a real family? Marley struggles with this question throughout the novel. Does she find an answer for herself? If so, what is it? What do you think makes a real family?

**Activities and Projects**

* + Inspired by Jack's poetic notes to Marley, write a letter to a far-off relative. Describe yourself, your home, and your friends. Tell him or her about important books in your life. Share your plans for the future.
	+ Heaven is set in the summer of 1996, when a large number of black churches in the South were burned down. These tragedies remind Momma and Pops of the early 1960s. Why? Research this critical period in the civil rights movement. Why were black churches at risk back then? Who was attacking them?
	+ "It's like that six degrees of separation thing," Marley thinks, when an intriguing letter from Alabama arrives just after she sees news reports of church burnings in the state, "everybody is closer than they think to everybody else." Play your own game of "six degrees of separation." Build a chain of personal connections that link you to notable people or distant places.
	+ Marley was named in honor of the late Jamaican singer Bob Marley. Listen to recordings of his music. Read about his life and learn about his lasting influence. Why do you think Marley is pleased to share his name?

**About the author**
**Angela Johnson** lives in Kent, Ohio. She is the author of many acclaimed picture books, novels, and poetry collections, among them *Toning the Sweep,* winner of the 1994 Coretta Scott King Award, and *When I Am Old with You* and *The Other Side: Shorter Poems,* both Coretta Scott King Honor Books.