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# Personal Reading

## Finding Truth in the Deep Heart's Core

Readers of *English Journal* have met Carey F. Applegate before in her article “Carpe Diem in the Mississippi Delta,” which appeared in the November 2003 issue. In that article, Applegate, a teacher trained by the Mississippi Teacher Corps, emphasized the view that education is the key to socioeconomic and political freedom and that “reading helps to put people into the best possible position to succeed” (30). Now she has reviewed Michael Johnston’s *In the Deep Heart’s Core*, an engaging account of another young teacher in Mississippi whose struggle with the needs of his students widens his perspective on the complex role of the classroom teacher.

### *In the Deep Heart’s Core*

Michael Johnston. New York: Grove, 2002. 240 pages (paperback). \$13.00. ISBN: 0-8021-4024-6.

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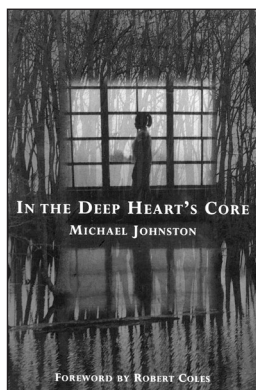
If Mississippi is the heart of the Deep South, then the Mississippi Delta is the deep heart’s core.

—*In the Deep Heart’s Core*

The publication of Michael Johnston’s *In the Deep Heart’s Core* caused controversy among students, teachers, and administrators in the Mississippi Delta. New teachers were warned by some principals during orientation meetings not to come to the Delta to “write a book and try to get famous.” Teachers seemed to take sides; either they viewed Johnston’s book as a revealing glimpse into the reality that they

faced every day or they saw it as overly simplified—just another Northern teacher trying to be the salvation of Delta students and misrepresenting them and the school in the process. Some parents and students began to approach Northern teachers with a heightened sense of hesitancy. How would this new young teacher from the North tell their children’s stories? Would he or she focus on the gang member or the honor student? Would the students be real or just another caricature of small-town African American life?

*In the Deep Heart’s Core* is about the students at Greenville High School—located in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, one of the most economically depressed areas in the nation—as seen through the eyes of Michael Johnston, a young, Caucasian, Teach for America teacher. The book describes the journey of Johnston and his students as they struggle through the chaos that defines their daily lives to the ultimate hope that they find within themselves and each other. His story is comparable to the mythological Pandora’s box, in which hope can only be found by sifting through the sorrow and mischief that his students bring into the classroom. The book is divided into four parts, each section representing a different stage in John-



ston's pilgrimage into the Delta. As such, each part has a different theme and expresses distinct emotions and experiences.

Part 1, "You Ain't Been Here Long," describes Johnston's move to the Delta through a stranger's eyes; it covers tentative encounters with Greenville residents and his fumbling interactions with students during the first few weeks as a novice teacher. After a shaky move into Greenville, Johnston begins his teaching assignment. He describes his first day:

My goal for the first day—and for that unspecified amount of time that it would take for my students and myself to understand our roles—was to devise enough activities to keep the class productive and reasonably silent. . . . For the moment I wanted to make sure I could keep the chaos at bay. (26)

After preparing for a full day of classes and putting on his game face, Johnston is called to the cafeteria to gather his students. Before he can call out the first name, a fight erupts in the cafeteria. He tries to intercede, only to be brushed aside like a mosquito. He watches, helpless, as a veteran teacher breaks up the fight and leads a student away. His first challenge as a teacher has provided his first stumbling block.

The days following the lunchroom incident prove to be as challenging as the first. Erasers are lobbed at him during class and profanities are scrawled on the desks, but eventually a rapport begins to develop as he gets to know the students individually.

Their stories told of men and women who had forsaken them in the midst of a burning city and were now astonished to see that they had emerged, hardened by

fire. Like Achilles, they bore only a hidden spot of flesh that betrayed the reality that, underneath, they were vulnerable—they were still children. (50)

Despite everything that his students have endured and every "I'm grown" moment that they try to claim, their courage and strength shine through in their stories. They stick up for each other, and they defend their values, even when doing so causes more harm than good.

Part 2, "Those Who Don't Know Any Better," opens with a poem written by one of Johnston's students in which she asserts that strangers run through her neighborhood, afraid of the people who live within its boundaries, but she

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knows better because she knows the stories of each person in her community. In Part 2, Johnston takes the role of a person in an unfamiliar neighborhood "who doesn't know any better."

It is in Part 2 that Johnston introduces readers to some of his most memorable students. Twenty-year-old Corelle, taking sophomore English, rules over the class with sharp wit and distracting jests. When given a detention for inappropriate behavior, Corelle refuses to cooperate, responding, "Hey, Mr. J., you gonna buy my booze for me? You gonna buy my dope? You gonna pay to take my girlfriend out Friday night? You gonna buy those good condoms for me? If you can't

do that, I ain't coming to no detention" (67). What resulted from this confrontation was a home visit that opened Johnston's eyes to "the most heartbreaking of stereotypes" (70), during which Johnston met Corelle's mother, high on marijuana and holding no hope for her son.

Johnston also introduces Larry, Jevon, and Oron. Each student offers a dark hope, shadowed by reality and pessimism. Between trouble and triumph Johnston and his students explore metaphorical games of chess, *The Piano Lesson*, and front-page headlines in which his students are the unfortunate stars.

Part 3, "Nothing Else Matters," illustrates a shift in Johnston's thinking. The students' stories become deeper and more meaningful. He appears to have made a conscious decision to move from the shock of realizing how troubled some of his students are to being an active participant in their lives. After a student's death, he and the students place their desks in a circle to talk through their understanding of the circumstances around her death and begin to work through their grief over the loss (126). He begins to see the students not just as automatons who come to school to work on usage and mechanics but also as

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complex individuals with turbulent lives that can dramatically impact their academic affairs. With that understanding comes a newfound appreciation of who they are and where they are coming from. It's as if he has stopped seeing them as opponents and has

started to work with them toward success.

One of the most interesting students in the book is Marvin, an intelligent “enigma” who became fascinated with chess through his interactions with Johnston. “Independently he found a way to nurture a profoundly inquisitive mind; he developed an extraordinary intelligence, honing it even as those skills became less and less popular—even to the point that they rubbed fiercely against the texture of his own existence” (159). After practicing with other students and playing repeated matches against his teacher, Marvin becomes the first person at the school to beat Johnston at chess. Their respect for each other develops to the point where Johnston becomes an honorary member of Marvin’s family, keeping in contact with them even after he leaves Greenville.

In the all-too-short Part 4, “In the Deep Heart’s Core,” Johnston writes about some of his successes with the students. He recalls a rapped modernization of Marc Antony’s eulogy as he stands over the corpse of Brutus in *Julius Caesar*; students who stop by his room for voluntary ACT tutoring; impromptu philosophical jam sessions with other teachers; and lessons that ask the students to dream of a utopia, a place of peace such as the one that Yeats described in “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” It is in Part 4 that Johnston becomes a part of the community that he teaches and finds the hope that he has been seeking within the students for so long.

Overall, this is a solid representation of *part* of what it means to be a teacher in the heart of Mississippi. *In the Deep Heart’s Core* is Johnston’s truth about his life in the Delta. While it may not always

showcase the reality that many people want highlighted or be the truth for every teacher and student in the Delta, it is an honest representation of some of the circumstances that exist within this magical, crazy world that we call home. In many schools in the Delta, the first few school days are chaotic; schedules are tentative at best, and students are housed in their homeroom classes for hours, if not days, at a time. There is a strong history of racism that influences the daily lives of Delta residents; the private academies for

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white students were founded on this history, and the fear that the public schools are havens to gangs and inadequate academics continues to separate communities. It is widely acknowledged that too many students become teen parents and take on adult roles too early in their lives. The burdens of poverty infiltrate many aspects of life—from students not having pens or notebook paper to fights that break out over a student’s “baby’s daddy”—but the students and their families do not want to be defined by these burdens. They’re much more three-dimensional than that. It’s too easy to see them as caricatures of themselves—and if you only read portions of this book, you will deny yourself the opportunity to have the students “fleshed out” into real human beings.

In addition to the gang members, pregnant girls, and struggling learners described in Johnston’s book, there are also numerous students who work hard to maintain good grades, have high expectations of themselves, and demand excellence from their teachers and their peers. Not every student is a diamond in the rough, waiting for a young teacher to come along and teach them chess or provide a quiet respite from the chaos of the streets; some are brilliant sapphires and emeralds who shine brightly on their own. From the drumline captain with the charming smile who can explain symbolism in *A Lesson Before Dying* to the shy, awkward teenager who reads aloud in class for the first time, these children are not tragedies. They are a beautiful part of this community, and they should be celebrated. However, Johnston so emphasizes their limitations that their successes seem meager.

Johnston does not fully capture the inherent pride of the people he sought to represent. After hundreds of years of being denied education, many African Americans in the Delta are pleased with the strides that they have taken over the past few decades. In addition to the occasional Ivy League-educated doctors and lawyers, the Delta has produced teachers, entrepreneurs, nurses, social workers, and others that they are proud to call their own. While there are still significant struggles to acknowledge, many people in the local community would rather be defined by their successes than by their failures.

The land and its people are intrinsically connected. As one has flashes of brilliance and turmoil, so does the other. The Delta has a

quiet beauty that's hard to describe. As you drive along the highway to Grenada, you can see the sun's reflection in the bayou filtering through the trees that line the road. Along Highway 82 from Indianola to Greenville, there are endless catfish ponds and cotton farms, and there's a certain tranquility that comes from watching them stream past you. At dusk you can watch a million shades of pink and purple bursting through

the clear blue sky as the night settles.

Johnston's poetic voice and soulful mastery of language throughout the book engage the readers' minds and hearts. Teachers will hear their students' voices echoed in their Greenville High School counterparts, and teachers of students struggling with poverty will relate to many of the stories he tells—both successes and failures. His students are products of their envi-

ronment and a testimony to the strength of the human heart.

Johnston brings a piece of the Delta, "the deep heart's core," to his readers through this book. While his perspective and his "truth" are not necessarily mine, Johnston's book ultimately serves to open a much-needed dialogue about living and teaching in a land of promise and challenge.