Old man Joseph never imagined a family could start this way. When he finds a baby abandoned on a lonely L.A. street, he vows to raise it as his own. He's an old farmer and knows nothing of parenting, even less about raising a Mexican baby. Yet Joseph keeps his promise and with time he realizes that even in the darkest barrio, there is a world to explore, songs and stories to be shared. Even in the darkest barrio, there is love. Illustrated by Caldecott-Honor Medal winner Carol Byard and beautifully told by Tony Johnston, Angel City is a moving tribute to the strength of family no matter its form.

My Personal Review:
Picture books can be a lot more than a sweet story for preschoolers that you read them at bedtime. Some picture books are not sweet, are not for little children and may not make for good bedtime tales. Angel City is one of those kinds of books: an amazing, profound and powerful read that doesn't quite fit the familiar mold. The reader gets that little chill that announces this book is something special just looking at the cover showing an old black man comforting a young Mexican child. Angel City is a stunning and unusual picture book that takes on some tough issues with a heart and poignancy that sings through the words. If you ever thought picture books were just kid stuff, this book might change your mind.

Tony Johnston is the author of over 100 books for children, and doesn't appear to be losing her touch for creating thought provoking stories. The text in this particular picture book is lyrical, the story told in poetic rather than straight narrative sentences. An old black man lives in the tough part of town where he finds a baby abandoned in a Dumpster. He takes in the tiny Mexican baby and raises the boy himself. The story follows both of them as Juan grows up. But this isn't a tale of rainbows and cheerful adventures. From the first page, Johnston is taking us on a tour of poverty stricken Los Angeles with its homeless and its gang wars. As the old man Joseph mutters when finding Juan: "Where's the love?" The question, spoken with a cynical edge, is nevertheless answered in the love that
Joseph has for the boy. Johnston's themes are at once heart wrenching and inspiring--for even faced with all the hardships that life has set against them, people still find room to care and thrive in spite of it all. Joseph raises Juan with the help of his neighbors and learns about the Mexican culture and language so that he can provide the boy with them. But every day Joseph worries about the boy growing up in an environment full of guns and knives and other hurtful things. The story continues with a school age Juan befriending another young boy, Chucho. But then a stray bullet kills Chucho and 9-year-old Juan is left heartbroken over his friend who will never get to see his 10th birthday. The story ends with Joseph comforting Juan.

The choice to go with a poetic style appears to be a good one: had this story been told narrative style, the emotional energy may not have come through as clearly and the story might have become pedantic rather than poignant. The story itself is to be commended on tackling topics that are hard issues for even adults to deal with, and not succumbing to any kind of happily-ever-after mentality. Unfortunately, I did find the story lost its central thread when the narrative shifted away from Old Joseph to include Chucho. From the start, this has been Juan and Joseph's story, focused on their relationship as Juan grows from baby to toddler, to ten year old boy. The introduction of Chucho feels a bit jarring, as it takes the focus away from it's original core relationship for a few pages, and then readers are returned to Joseph and Juan once more. Given how central Joseph is to the story, to have the narrative lens suddenly exclude him for the few pages about Chucho seemed more abrupt than necessary. Despite this concern, the story is a powerful one, but not for the very young or the extremely sensitive. I put a full summary with this story so that parents will be aware of the nature of this book before they read it--and prepared to discuss the questions and concerns their children might have.

The artist's stunning work makes this book eye-catching and brings the words to life. Carole Byard has crafted some marvelous illustrations for other picture books; Working Cotton by Sherley Anne Williams and Cornrows by Camille Yarbrough are just two examples. Ms. Byard sharpens her skills against the powerful prose set down by Tony Johnston and the result is that the images and the text blend together smoothly, so that one supports the other. Each page has a full picture illustration that is lush with color and softly painted details. The warmth and hope communicated through these pictures transmute a very stark and often uncompromising environment into a human landscape of losses and loves that are universal to all readers.

I'd recommend this picture book for children 8 and up as a general age range--this is one of those books I feel is as much for adults as it is anyone. For those who enjoy this story and are looking for other books that deal with powerful and thought-provoking issues please take a look at The Harmonica, also written by Tony Johnston, and One Green Apple by Eve Bunting and Ted Lewin.
Happy Reading! ^_^ Shanshad

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