

**Title**

Johnson, A. (2003). *The first part last*. New York: Simon Pulse.

**Genre**

Contemporary Teen Fiction

**Cultural Designation**

African-American; Urban

**Grade levels**

This text is most likely associated with grades 9-12, due to the nature of the theme of teen pregnancy. Some of the topics that would be approached in class discussion might be too intense for students at the middle school level.

**How I learned about this text**

The book was introduced to me through my discussions via exit slips in my Foundations Seminar class. After mentioning that I was interested in current and culturally relevant texts that would allow for the inclusion of character education within class discussions, Professor Gregory mentioned this book.

**Synopsis**

Bobby is a typical teenager, attending high school in New York, hanging out at the pizzeria with his buddies J.L. and K-Boy, and spending time with his girlfriend, Nia, until she breaks the news that she is pregnant. Faced with the dilemma of raising a child as teenagers, Bobby and Nia contemplate and eventually decide to put the baby up for adoption. Right before giving birth, however, Nia slips into a coma because of eclampsia. Feather, their child, is born and Nia is left in a vegetative state. Bobby decides to keep Feather and is left to struggle as single teenage parent. His divorced parents are supportive, but his mother refuses to spoil him by taking care of his duties as a parent (finding a sitter, getting up at night to care for Feather, etc.). The story documents Bobby's efforts to care for Feather, finish high school, and try to enjoy life as a teenager. The author tells the story going back and forth between "then," when Bobby finds out Nia is pregnant, and "now," as Bobby cares for his daughter, Feather, as a single father, providing background information about Bobby's current situation with the "then" chapters.

**Teaching the text**

For this text, a free write about thoughts and biases that students possess about teen pregnancy and single fathers would provide a baseline for beginning a discussion about the controversial issues of teen pregnancy and single fatherhood. Class discussions should focus not only on these controversial issues, but also on the literary direction Johnson used to tell Bobby's story. A starting point might be to ask students why Johnson chose to switch chapters between "now" and "then," rather than tell the story in chronological order, and how this affects the reader's view of Bobby as a teenage father. Also, there is a chapter within the text that describes Bobby's idea of a fairy tale version of his life with Nia. Students could be asked to write a fairy tale depicting their own past, present, or future life as a fairy tale and ask them to describe in a reflective paragraph how and why it differs from reality.

**Synergistic texts**

Gather Together in My Name by Maya Angelou – this text would offer an autobiographical look at the results of teen pregnancy from the voice of a renowned author. There are a few contentious parts, such as the character's foray into prostitution, but if read and guided wisely by the teacher, the book could provide an interesting comparison to Bobby's situation.

Hanging on to Max by Margaret Bechard – Sam struggles to raise Max without his girlfriend and only monetary support from his widowed father in an alternative high school. With another single teenage father struggling to raise his father, this book would allow students to discuss support systems that teenagers need and often lack in serious situations.

**Appropriate Ages**

The book is mostly appropriate in the handling of teen sex and pregnancy and Bobby's story is mostly emotional in nature. There is one chapter (p. 47-50) that could potentially cause some questions that might be inappropriate for direct address, which alludes to teen sex.

**Recommendation**

This text should be read as an assigned classroom text. It would be adequate as an independent read, but I feel the plot raises some key questions about support, pregnancy, and even potential questions about death and students would benefit from supervision of reading. Also, the text, as a literary device, provides an opportunity for discussion about creative writing techniques, particularly with respect to chronology.

**Reading plan**

p. 60 ("now") followed by p. 66-67 ("then"). Page 60 discusses part of an emotional day for Bobby as he leaves Feather with his neighbor only to ditch school and spray paint on a brick wall and get arrested for doing so. This follows with pages 66-67, where Bobby describes his "fairy tale" life with his friends and Nia. These two pages would be read aloud to provide insight into the emotional roller coaster that Bobby is experiencing as a teenage parent and the difference between his real life experiences and his dreams for himself and Nia.