

The BiblioFiles: Atinuke

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents the BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today my guest is Atinuke, author of the Anna Hibiscus series that includes *Anna Hibiscus*, *Hooray for Anna Hibiscus!*, *Good Luck, Anna Hibiscus!*, *Have Fun, Anna Hibiscus!*, and a children's picture book, *Anna Hibiscus' Song*. Anna Hibiscus lives in Africa, amazing Africa. She lives in a big white house on a compound with her extended family-- mother, father, twin baby brothers, grandmother, grandfather, aunts, uncles, and numerous cousins. The books tell the story of Anna's life with her family and her experiences in both Africa and eventually, the larger world.

Filled with interesting stories and endearing characters, the series gives young readers an amazing portrait of life in a large family in Africa. Atinuke also addresses serious social issues, such as Anna's first encounters with children from an unfamiliar culture, the plight of the young orange sellers outside the gates of Anna's family compound, and her eye opening trip to the other side of the city where children in rags beg and search rubbish piles for food. Atinuke's skill at navigating these difficult scenes with the reader is admirable, as are the humorous scenes involving Anna's large family and community. The Anna Hibiscus books are written with honesty, humanity, joy, and love.

In addition to the Anna Hibiscus books, Atinuke has written *The No. 1 Car Spotter*, a story that features a boy in a small village in Africa. His favorite hobby is to spot cars as they pass by on the road, a task he carries out with great enthusiasm. Atinuke joins us from Wales. Welcome to the BiblioFiles.

ATINUKE: Thank you.

DR. DANA: You were first a professional storyteller. Later you became an author. Why did you decide to write a book about Anna Hibiscus?

ATINUKE: I decided to write a book about Anna Hibiscus because it had always struck me, from when I was a very young child visiting the UK, that children in the UK knew very, very little about the sort of childhood that I had in Nigeria. And even when I grew up and moved permanently to the UK, working as a professional storyteller and meeting lots of children, it still struck me that in children's minds, people in Africa lived in huts in the bush surrounded by wild animals, often in great poverty and hunger. And that was the only reality the children seemed to have in their minds.

And I wanted to write stories about my childhood-- about children living in a big city, and fairly affluent middle class families going to school, having the sort of childhood that's shared by

children all around the globe, but in a very African setting. And so yes, Anna Hibiscus was born out of that.

DR. DANA: How did your storytelling background influence your writing style?

ATINUKE: I'm sure that my storytelling background has influenced my writing in many ways. I'm not exactly sure what they are. But what I am aware of doing is, when I'm writing Anna Hibiscus, and also when I'm writing The No. 1 Car Spotter, I'm writing aloud in my head. So I write very slowly, and I'm reading aloud to myself what I'm writing as I'm writing it. And the voice that I am reading aloud in, and the voice that I'm writing in, is my Nigerian voice, because I grew up in Nigeria. So I grew up speaking both Nigerian English and also Pidgin English-- what is so-called Pidgin English-- which is a different language altogether that has a different grammatical structure to English, but is based on English.

But when I'm storytelling and I speak in my Nigerian voice, I speak Nigerian English in my Nigerian voice. And when I'm writing, I'm writing in my Nigerian voice. And when I read and perform my books, that's in my Nigerian voice, as well.

DR. DANA: Like Anna, you were born in Africa and spent a good part of your childhood there. One thing Anna wants very much is to experience snow. When you were a child, did you wish for this, as well?

ATINUKE: Yes, I did, very much. My mother's from the UK, and we visited her parents in the UK almost every year. But it was always in the summer. So I saw snow for the first time when I was 10 years old and I'd been longing to see it. And I still long to see it. We don't get that much snow in Wales, and me and my children each winter have our fingers crossed. But the snow will come, and the roads will close, and there'll be no school, and we'll be able to sled and drink hot chocolate as much as we like. Yeah, I still love snow.

DR. DANA: These books are written for children, but they feature some rather heavy issues-- Anna's experience with the orange sellers outside her house, her very eye opening trip to the other side of the city. I especially like the story about Anna's garden and the water shortage in the city. Would you read it for us?

ATINUKE: Yes.

DR. DANA: I'll introduce the passage by saying that it's the dry season in Africa, and Anna's family's garden is parched, and brown, and covered with sand blowing from the Sahara. The family must ration their water, pouring whatever's left into a tank on the family compound. So now it's evening, and all the excess water has been poured into the tank.

ATINUKE: "Then Grandfather nodded at the grown-up cousins, Sociable ran to the water tank and grabbed the handle of the pump. Thank-God picked up a long hose, and when Grandfather nodded again, Sociable began to pump. Thank-God pointed the hose at the mango trees. The whole family held their breath. A stream of clear water spread out of the end of the hose. The

mango trees were green again! The water spread over trees, and bushes, and grass, and flowers. It washed away the sand and gave the plants a long, cool drink.

Aunties and Uncles admired the hibiscuses bushes. Little cousins clapped as the flowers picked up their heads and bloomed again. Grandmother and Grandfather nodded as the grass turned gorgeous and green. Anna Hibiscus smiled at her favorite mango tree.

The family had saved enough water that day to spray almost all of the garden.

'We did not go gently with our buckets for nothing,' said the aunties and uncles to each other.

'We washed ourselves and we washed the garden,' the cousins congratulated one another proudly.

And this, thought Anna Hibiscus, is why our garden is the brightest and most beautiful garden in the whole country!

Everybody walked around the garden. Anna Hibiscus went to look at the flowers growing by the gate. Through the gate, she saw the girls who sold oranges and plantains to make money for their families. The girls were going home for the night. Anna Hibiscus smiled and waved.

'Look!' she shouted, pointing at the flowers.

The girls looked at Anna Hibiscus, but they did not smile at her. They did not wave. They frowned. Anna was confused.

'Bedtime, Anna,' her mother called. And Anna Hibiscus turned away from the gate.

But she continued to worry. Why did the gate girls not wave and smile at her?

The next morning, Anna Hibiscus ran down to the gate. The air was already hot and dry; the garden was already dusty. The gate girls were there, waiting for early morning customers.

Anna Hibiscus shouted, 'Good morning, Angelina! Good morning, Concertina! Good morning, Ngosi!'

The gate girls looked at Anna Hibiscus. They did not smile. They did not say good morning.

'Way-tin happen? Anna asked. 'Wha's wrong?'

The girls did not answer. They just carried on with their work.

Anna Hibiscus saw that their clothes were stained, their faces were shiny with sweat, and their arms and legs were dirty.

Maybe they did not even have a warm cup of water to wash with like grandfather did, she thought.

The gate girls looked around and saw Anna Hibiscus still waiting there.

'Le' me tell you, Anna Hibiscus,' said Angelina, sounding angry. 'Then you can go. There is no more water in this useless ye-ye city.'

'No more water?' asked Anna Hibiscus, thinking of her family's well.

'Poor person water finish,' snapped Concertina. 'Well dry. Tap no run at-all at-all.'

'Old people, small brothers and sisters suffer and die now,' said Ngosi.

The gate girls stopped speaking. Anna Hibiscus started to cry.

'In dis your compound you throw water for ground,' said Angelina.

The gate girls turned their backs on Anna Hibiscus and went back to their work. They had no time to cry.

Anna Hibiscus no longer wondered why they were not her friends. 'I did not know!' she shouted.

Anna ran to Grandmother and Grandfather on the veranda. She told them about the gate girls and about the poor, thirsty children in the city.

Grandfather and Grandmother looked serious. They ordered Thank-God to pump water and Sociable to carry it to the gate for the poor girls and their families.

Then they summoned everybody in the big white house out onto the veranda.

'Is this true?' Grandmother and Grandfather asked the uncles and aunties. 'Poor people are suffering in the city?'

The aunties and uncles looked surprised. 'It is true that the wells are dry and water has become costly,' they said.

'Go and ask the gate girls,' sobbed Anna, 'people in the city are suffering.'

'It is true,' said Sociable.

Grandmother and Grandfather and Anna's mother and father and all the aunties and uncles and cousins and Anna herself sat silent.

'My mango tree is not suffering,' Anna Hibiscus said.

Everybody nodded.

'Because we save water for it every day,' said Sweetheart, the smallest girl cousin.

'That is why the whole garden is growing green and lovely,' Anna's mother smiled.

'But outside in the city,' Anna went on, 'children are not growing lovely. They are suffering because nobody saves them any water.'

Angel and Sweetheart started to cry.

'Anna Hibiscus, what can we do?' said her father. 'We do not have enough water for the whole city.'

'We never even had enough water for the whole garden,' said Uncle Tunde.

'Did we let that stop us?' said Anna's mother.

'No!' cried Auntie Grace and Auntie Joly and Clarity and Common Sense and Joy and Benz and Wonderful and Angel and Chocolate and Sweetheart and Anna.

'We might have enough water for the children of the city,' said Uncle Bizi Sunday.

'Let us try,' said Anna's father, sighing.

'Agreed!' shouted Anna and all of her cousins.

'So, we have decided,' said Grandmother, smiling.

Double and Trouble clapped their hands.

'Every spare milliliter of water, let us put it in the tank,' said Grandfather.

'Then we can water the children of the city!' shouted Anna.

And so it was that Anna Hibiscus' garden became an ordinary garden. The grass disappeared. The flowers died. The bushes wilted. The trees were dry and dusty all harmatten long. It was no longer the brightest and most beautiful garden in the whole city.

But outside the gate a line of hopeful children grew with their cups and bottles red and yellow and green and blue. When Sociable filled them up with water their smiles were the brightest and most beautiful smiles in the whole city. The brightest and most beautiful smiles in the whole country.

And Anna Hibiscus and Chocolate and even Angel learned to wash using only one jug full of water.

'In order to see the most beautiful smiles in the whole world!' Anna Hibiscus said."

DR. DANA: Thank you so much. This passage is such an excellent example of seeing a tough issue through the eyes of a child. How did you decide which issues to tackle in these books?

ATINUKE: I never really decided, as such. I knew that I wanted to write about happy experiences of childhood like the one that I had growing up in Nigeria. And Anna has that really happy faith childhood growing up in a big, modern city. I knew at the same time not to mention the fact that in big, modern African cities there is a lot of poverty-- beggars, street children-- and it's right in your face. I mean, there's poverty all over the world but where I grew up it was unignorable. So I knew that I didn't want to ignore that. And then, I just write the stories. So the issues just come up naturally of their own accord. I don't really decide which issues to tackle.

DR. DANA: Anna lives in a city in Africa, but you never name the city. I'd be interested to know why.

ATINUKE: Yeah, it was a really big decision. And I was aware that there would be pros and cons to whatever I decided. In the end, I decided not to name the city. If I had had to name the city, I guess I would have named it Lagos, which is the city that I grew up in. But I didn't really want to be writing about Lagos. And I didn't really want my books to be that specific. I write fiction. And they definitely are fiction. Nobody apart from Anna Hibiscus has exactly the experience that she has.

But I didn't want to write and have people say, this is what it's like to grow up in Lagos, or this is what it's like to grow up in Nigeria. Because there are so many different experiences and childhoods within any one city, in any one place. And it's too easy to generalize and stereotype, especially when one's talking about Africa. So I guess I chose to actually generalize myself, really to give readers a clue-- that this is a fictional world that could be taking place on some unspecified point in Africa. I don't know if that explains it very well, but that's as close as I can get at the moment.

DR. DANA: When children talk to you about your books, what do they comment on?

ATINUKE: Oh, all sorts of things. Children love the humor in the books. They love Double and Trouble. They love when Anna Hibiscus gets into trouble, when Double and Trouble get her into trouble. They love the relationships between the family. They love the fact that there are big issues for them to mull over. They love the pictures and the warmth. Yeah, they love-- within The No. 1 Car Spotter series, they love the excitement and the difference to their lives of that. No. 1 Car Spotter experience is very different to a modern, urban childhood. And with Anna, I think they love the fact that although Anna Hibiscus lives in amazing Africa, her life is very like theirs.

DR. DANA: When did you decide to start a new series, The No. 1 Car Spotter?

ATINUKE: My dad sent me an email with some photos in-- I think it was an email that had been sent to him, and he was sending them on-- and one of the photographs was extraordinary. It was

the back of a Toyota pickup truck. It had had the front sawn off it, and it was being pulled by six cows. And there was a whole family sitting in the back going to market, in the back of this Toyota pickup that was cow-powered.

And I found this photograph really inspiring, and wondered to myself how it could possibly happen and who could've thought of that. And I thought really, only a boy could've thought of that. So I wrote a story about a little boy having this idea and why he has this idea. And I showed it to my publisher and they said, this is great. And one story isn't enough. Let's have a whole book with full stories, and in fact, let's have more than one book. Because boys don't read, they said, which I'm not sure that's true or not. But I do have two boys of my own. So together with my boys we write these No. 1 Car Spotter books about the fun things that boys do, and how their imaginations work, and what kind of trouble they get into. Yeah.

DR. DANA: The No. 1 Cars Spotter's childhood is very different from Anna Hibiscus'. He lives in a small village. She lives in a big city. She's middle class. He is in the lower class. Did you have to do much research?

ATINUKE: I do do more research for The No. 1 Car Spotter, because although I've visited the village, I've never lived in the village like the No. 1 car spotter does. And my background is much more affluent than his. I knew that I wanted to write about the experience of a child that, in this Western culture, we would call a child who has a deprived lifestyle. And I wanted to write about him in a really powerful way. Because I think we quite often make the mistake of thinking that because somebody is poor, they are therefore miserable, and unempowered, and probably not very bright, not very happy. And I know from my own experience, both as an adult and as a child, that it isn't true-- that material wealth doesn't equate with happiness. So I wanted to write about a really strong, powerful, fun, joyful character who just happens to live in a really poor village. And The No. 1 Car Spotter grew out of that as much as out of the photograph and wanting to write a boy experience as well.

DR. DANA: Atinuke, thank you so much for coming on the BiblioFiles today. It was a real pleasure to talk with you.

ATINUKE: Thank you very much for inviting me.

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