

Podcast 505: Homegrown Education with Amber O’Neal Johnson

Episode Transcript

Amber Johnston: Those women wrote books about what they read with their kids. If you think that there are other things for people to consider, then you write one with the books that you've read with your kids. So *Soul School* takes kids on a joy filled journey through the heart of Black American culture, one book at a time.

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: Happy Thanksgiving, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Time flies, doesn't it?

Julie Walker: It sure does. So I was thinking about our theme for next year. So it's the end of 2025. We're already ramping up for 2026, and one of the things that we're going to be talking a lot about in 2026 is conventions and going to conventions and the value you can find by going to a convention, listening to speakers, putting your hands on curriculum, meeting other people who are walking the same educational pathway as you and learning and growing. And I know you go to a lot of homeschool conventions every year.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it's, it's community building too, you know? A lot of people probably never went to a state convention 30 years ago.

Julie Walker: A lot of people didn't?

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, a lot of people today never had a chance to go to a state convention 25, 30 years ago.

Julie Walker: Yeah, because they were probably infants or not even born yet.

Andrew Pudewa: But what's interesting to me is there was a particular spirit of unity that existed—like this is our state and we are the homeschoolers, and we will get together. And they would do things like sing songs together and have general sessions with news of the state. And I really kinda miss that. Some states have it a little bit and then a lot of conventions are just—show up, go to talks. But the kind of the unifying feeling that you would get from being at a state convention, I wish we could recapture that.

Julie Walker: Because at that time, and of course we're talking about when we were in the throes of homeschooling, and you were of course speaking at these homeschool conventions,

but still in the throes of homeschooling, it was wall to wall people. We'd have thousands and thousands of homeschoolers just rubbing shoulders, literally with each other and looking at all the curriculum.

Andrew Pudewa: That was the way that you would get ideas and meet and hear people and ask questions and touch stuff and read stuff and look at stuff. And I think one of the sad parts of the explosion of online everything is just that human element kind of has been lost in so many people's lives. So our goal is to encourage people: get off the couch, get out of the pajamas, put on some nicer clothes, and go to a convention and meet people and ask questions. And of course not everybody can meet everybody at every convention, but there are some people that should be met.

Julie Walker: Yes, and this year I went to a homeschool convention that you did not attend. I did that actually a couple times, and I met the most beautiful, delightful woman that I wanted to introduce our listeners to. And that is Amber Johnson. Amber, thank you for joining us on our podcast today.

Amber Johnston: Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Julie Walker: So you are, I think the thing that was intriguing to me when I went through the program to see which talks I would want to go to if I was not working at a booth because I was working at a booth and then doing a couple speaking gigs myself. I was at the Christian Home Educators Association of California Convention at Biola University, which so many great things about that. When I was homeschooling my boys in Southern California, we were members of CHEA, and eventually when my boys were old enough to go to college, they went to Biola University. And when I was all done homeschooling. I went to Biola University and got my MBA. So all those things, all those roads converged at Biola.

And I looked at that one conference talk that I'd like you to speak to because I went to your booth and said, "Tell me more about this mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, and using literature as a way to explore." What is this metaphor, Amber, that you talk about?

Amber Johnston: It's something I love. And there was a professor at Ohio State University years ago who wrote a paper on this. She has since retired, her name's Rodin Sims Bishop, and she wrote about this idea of literature as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. And so a book is a mirror. It's a book where a child can see themselves and their community reflected back to them. We're an African American family. So at first glance, people often think of ethnicity or culture in that way. It's that, but it's so much more than that. And so an example I give that a lot of homeschoolers will understand, it's when you're reading a book with your child or even watching a movie, and a character mentions that they're homeschooled and your kid starts jumping up and down, running around the house. "They're homeschooled. They're homeschooled!" It's that. It was a mirror for them. Or maybe a child who lives with their grandmother, or the grandmother lives with a family multi-generational living, and they'll feel that string of familiarity there. Or maybe. It's another family where this

book takes place in Illinois where I'm from, and we can go on and on. So these are books that are mirrors.

Books that are windows—it's an opportunity for a child to look through the window and learn about how somebody else that's different from them in some way is living. So maybe they live in a different place or maybe they have a different family structure. Maybe they have a lot of siblings and you only have one, or you're an only child, or perhaps they live in the Appalachia area or they live in another country, or they live in the city and you live out on a bunch of land outside of town. So all of these different things can help us. Maybe it's an immigrant story. There are a million different directions you can go in. And what's interesting is that every book is already a mirror or a window. This was just a way when I learned about this from the professor's work that I started sharing with the homeschooling community a way for us to look at our bookshelves, and not just to evaluate each individual book, but to say our shelves full of mirrors and windows.

And when you think about it, a book could also be both. So, for example, there are books that I've seen or that my family's experienced where the main characters are black. And so in some ways people say, well, that's a mirror. And I say, well, it is in some ways, but this family lives in the inner city and they don't have a father, and they're dealing with kind of urban strife and poverty. And that's not a mirror for my kids in that way. So there are aspects of the story that are a mirror. Maybe there's some cultural head nods that we can relate to, but then there are aspects that make that book a window as well.

And then finally, a sliding glass door. It's almost like this window is so good that not only is the child looking out the window, but they actually can open that sliding glass door and step into the story and they can picture themselves. So a quick example I read where a teacher said that her student, after they had studied the book, *Wonder*, which is about a boy who was born with a facial disfigurement and the student said, “Teacher after I was at Walmart the other day with my mom and I saw this boy in the aisle and he was in a wheelchair. And normally I would just look the other way and kind of ignore him because my mom says it's not polite to stare at people who looked different. But then I thought about Augie the boy from the Wonder Book. And so I just went up to him and I was like, Hey man, how you doing? And he was like, I'm good. How are you? He is like, good. And then I just kept walking and he's like, see, he's like, I talked to him because I knew Augie would want someone to talk to him.” And so that to me, when I read that interview, that story became a sliding glass door for that student.

So I've just found it to be a beautiful way to think about what we're already doing, which is reading books and adding some balance. It helps us to see what direction to go in with our children and ourselves actually.

Julie Walker: So many things I could ask you about that. But I want to back up a little bit, Amber, because this is a Homeschool 101 podcast. This is specifically for those. Families, those individuals who are thinking maybe homeschooling would be something that they would like to explore. Of course, it's November, December. Could you start homeschooling

your family in the middle of a school year? Well, absolutely, but that's a podcast for another day. But I'd like for you to share your story about how you started homeschooling and how your homeschooling journey has evolved. And I'm specifically looking at a book that I have in my hands that you edited. This is a book by you, and you collected a bunch of articles from your friends about homeschooling, but your article called "Finding Freedom on the Path Less Traveled" basically tells your story of how you got into homeschooling and how things have changed over the years for you. So can you describe that a little bit?

Amber Johnston: Yeah, so I was a stay-at-home mom, and our plan had always been that I would stay at home until the kids became school age, and then I would go back to work and my salary would pay for private Christian school, and my husband would continue to take care of the family with his.

As the time got closer, specifically it was pre-K, kindergarten 4. And my husband kept talking about homeschooling. Like I thought it was a joke. And I laughed every time because it was funny. 'cause that's not something I would ever consider and that's not something I'm interested in, nor do I have the ability to do that. And then one night he took me out to dinner and he like reached across the table, he held my hand. He's like, I really need to talk to you about something. I'm like, oh gosh, what have you done? You know? And he was like, well, every time I bring up homeschooling you start laughing. And I said, well, you laugh too. And he was like, mine is nervous laughter as a response to you because I don't know what to say. And he was like, the truth is that I actually really want the children to be homeschooled. And so that was the first time that I knew that he wasn't just kidding. And I was like, no, absolutely not.

I had all the reasons. One, the biggest one now I can say for sure was fear. Fear of a lot of different things. But one of them was that I think we had so much fun, we were having such an adventure and I didn't want my kids. To associate drudgery with me, and school is drudgery. That's in my mind. It's boring; it's not fun. And now I'll be the purveyor of the boring, not fun things. And so in his wisdom, he said, well, would you give it one year? Give it all you've got. And if at the end of that year you really feel this is not the thing for our family, I'll never ask you again. I was like, sold. Yes. Let me hurry up and get this year out of the way so he'll never ask me again. And in that year, I fell in love and that's how our homeschooling journey began.

Andrew Pudewa: A wise dad that,

Amber Johnston: Oh my gosh. So wise. It was very gentle.

Andrew Pudewa: How did he come to the idea that he wanted you guys to be a homeschooling family? What planted the seed in his heart?

Amber Johnston: Gosh, that's just so, I would say God, right, and then the idea that I believe that he wanted to continue what we already had, which was a big focus on family time and on recognizing and honoring each individual child in our home. And I also think, if I'm being

honest, that there was a part of this like, oh, my firstborn is brilliant that I think happens with every parent. So he was like, “Hey four, give me a joke. Gimme a break. That's a huge joke. My brilliant daughter, she's ready to tackle Harvard and they want her to be in a little preschool class.” So I think there was a little bit of that there as well. And I also think she was so spunky and just so full of life and he felt that that spark wasn't necessarily conducive to fitting into a classroom. And he didn't want her light to be dimmed. And so there were a few different things. And also we love to travel and that was a value that we had as a family, and I think he didn't want that to be compromised.

Andrew Pudewa: I was thinking about travel as you were talking about windows and glass doors and how children are just so excited to go somewhere. I'm noticing this with grandchildren, like they will sit around and talk for any number of minutes or hours about these fantastical trips they would love to take. They've never been to these places, but they've heard about them. They've read about them. They're aware that they exist, and so this desire for children to have new experiences is super deep in their soul, like they just crave that idea of, oh, go and experience something different. And that'll be education. That's what they experience education.

And I was thinking about when you were talking about the books, how books we've read aloud to the family become kind of like mini vacations years later. The kids will even say things like, oh, remember in *The Hobbit*, and they'll pull out something that they remember from the book that we read together. And travel, I think is the perfect compliment for that. And I sometimes do talk to people who are a little skeptical about homeschooling. Usually it's the opposite. The mom wants to do it and the dad's the skeptical one. But you bring up that idea. “But think of all the places you could go when it's not crowded with everyone else during August. You could go in September when it's cooler and everyone else is in school.” But that idea of travel and learning and books being a proxy for travel, I just love that.

Julie Walker: So you mentioned travel, Andrew and Amber, I'm gonna read a quote from your book because you used travel to pivot, and I love this. So here was typical homeschooling mom, if this is you, I'm stepping on your toes. Here we go. “There was a constant flow of opportunities to learn new things and have fun experiences within our community and friend groups. And I wanted to say yes to all of them. Yes, I want my children to play an instrument and sing in the chorus. Yes, I want them to be on the swim team, dance in the Nutcracker and learn to play soccer. Yes, we wanted in on book club, scouting, musical theater and coding class. Yes to Nature Club, Little League, volleyball, and 4H. I didn't want my kids to miss out on any of these great activities, and though I resisted and often said no, we slowly slipped into the land of the very full calendar. And then what happened, Amber?

Amber Johnston: So we left the country on one of our, we call them World Schooling trips and we were living in South America for three months, and during that time, obviously everything that we had been doing came to a screeching halt, and I got to study my children. And I got to see how we flowed naturally without all of these things dictating our time.

And we went to bed at a different time and we woke up at a different time and how much my children were discovering and how delightful the days were. And I was like, Wow, this is what I want. This is a good life. And I told myself then that when we returned back to the United States, back to our regular home and our regular life, that I would spend my time fiercely protecting the margin. And that kind of set up a new way of approaching activities for us.

Julie Walker: And I, what I love about that is as homeschooling moms and I was, I was the chief of them, FOMO, fear of missing out was real. And I didn't want my kids to miss out. I didn't wanna miss out and we did get too busy. I think that that is a danger that is so easy to slip into. And Amber, I think that one thing that you learned by really being forced to not be a slave to your schedule, but to prioritize free time is so, so valuable.

Amber Johnston: It is. And I want to say also it saved a lot of money. Like I realized that we were spending a lot of money on all these organized activities. You don't notice it all at once. It kind of sneaks up because this one's only this much, and this one's only that much, but then you need a costume and this one requires this special thing. And so it, it really helped us in that way as well.

Andrew Pudewa: I think everyone's wondering as I am. How old are your children now?

Amber Johnston: They are 16, 14, 12, and 10.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow. Just like clockwork there. Huh?

Julie Walker: So you are in the throes of it still. Amber, I do have to mention this because, uh, just like what I communicated to you back and forth with email is our listeners love book lists, and you've got a book list. And I'm going to read another quote from your book. I love your book. This is a quote actually from *When Children Love to Learn*, and this is a quote, the child is to come away having seen the sights, tasted the foods, experienced, the struggles, appreciated the culture, life, and times of the real people of history. And it makes me think of the book that I picked up when I was there at the CHIA Convention Sweet Tea. What was it called? You

Amber Johnston: *Sweet Tea and Cookies*.

Julie Walker: Sweet tea and cookies and I'm not a fan of sweet tea. Gotta be honest. Nor am I a fan of baking, but I loved the resource. This is a Deep South resource of culture and recipes and songs and poetry of Mississippi and of Louisiana and of South Carolina and of Georgia and a bonus of Alabama. And so I bought the book with intentions of cooking with my grandchildren. Left the book in California. Still have yet to do that, but I plan to do that perhaps in time for Thanksgiving. But you have another book that you wrote called *Soul School*. *Soul School*. So talk about that book, Amber, a little bit.

Amber Johnston: So I love books about books and I have all of those Honey for a Child's heart and the read aloud family and all these different books, and they're so good and they have so many excellent book recommendations. But as I was, my children, I'm raising them and we're reading, I always felt like maybe there was something missing that wasn't represented usually in a lot of books, and that was books featuring characters that look like my kids and books that talk about black American culture or even the Diaspora, not instead of, but alongside these other beautiful books. And when you notice something and you have feelings about it, you have two choices. You can get mad that somebody didn't do what you think they should do, or you can consider well, those women wrote books about what they read with their kids. Amber, if you think that there are other things for people to consider, then you write one with the books that you've read with your kids and together it'll just be a more complete picture.

And that's what I did. So *Soul School* takes kids on a joyful journey through the heart of Black American culture, one book at a time. So with the front part of the book, I just teach parents or educators what I'm looking for in a book that relates to our culture and why it's important. And most of the book, it's this really rich, heavily annotated and curated book list from preschool all the way to high school, non-fiction, fiction, across all genres, including poetry.

Julie Walker: Everyone needs that book on their bookshelf.

Andrew Pudewa: It sounds like a must-have.

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: I love what you said though. If more people had your attitude, you can either get angry or blame somebody or do something about it, take action. If we had more people who had that attitude, I think we'd have a better world.

Julie Walker: They would need to stop with all the activities and maybe go to South America for a few months to be able to do

Andrew Pudewa: And write books while having a bunch of kids.

Julie Walker: Our timekeeper has told us, I can't believe it, that we are out of time, Amber. So we are definitely going to have to have you come back and speak more about this idea of including different types of reading in our homeschooling, in our schools, so that we can have a better opportunity to open those sliding glass doors.

Andrew Pudewa: In the meantime, she's got a few resources, right? A few. She's got like three websites.

Julie Walker: Oh yeah. Amber, how can I forget? You have a website and tell us about some of the goodies that you have on your website.

Amber Johnston: So the website is Heritagemom.com, where people can find all the things that I do. And, and I have three books there and lesson guides. They're all rooted in literature, in children's literature. Some are history, some fairytale stuff, some geography stuff, the sweet tea and cookies that you mentioned, that family exploration of the Deep South.

And I still blog. I'm old, so I am holding onto that blog, but I still share articles about just homeschooling in general there, and thoughts on motherhood and parenting and all of those things. So, you, I can also be found on social media at HeritageMomblog.

Julie Walker: Amazing. So Andrew, when we have her come back, I want to unpack a recent blog. Today, it's a recent blog. By the time we have her back, it may not be so recent, but I still think it will be relevant and it's what we talked about a little bit, and that is how to teach classic books responsibly. So I think that's just going to be really helpful

Andrew Pudewa: That will be something to look forward to. Well, thank you so much, Amber. It's really been very enjoyable getting to know you a bit, and I hope our paths cross in this next year or two.

Amber Johnston: Definitely. Me too. Thank you so much for having me.

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