

## Family Focus:

# African-American Author Writes Children's Books

**J**il M. Ross is the creator of *Shenanigans*, a series of children's chapter books that target readers between seven and 11 years old. Ross began writing short stories for fun 13 years ago while recuperating from a broken leg. As her children got older and became of reading age, she constantly ran into dilemmas when trying to find thought provoking, entertaining and quality books for them to read that featured African-Americans in positive roles, and in current-day settings and situations. As a result, she began writing her own.

"Before creating the *Shenanigans Series*, I found plenty of books on Blacks as they relate to history and slavery, but nothing current-day or that dealt with issues of interest to today's youth; thus my book series was born," she recalls. "There were plenty of beginner chapter books, like the *Junie B. Jones* and *Amelia Bedelia* series, but nothing written especially for Black youth and early readers. Even the line of chapter books I found in the *American Girl* series that features an African-American character (Addie) is set in the post-civil war era. My research also uncovered, to

my dismay, that one of my favorite childhood authors, whose book covers often displayed black children, wasn't even African-Ameri-



can himself. Someone needed to do something, and that someone was me. Recent statistics reveal that Black and Hispanic children are most affected by discouragingly low reading scores, compared to other ethnic groups My mission is

now to be a part of conquering this crisis, by writing stories to keep youngsters engaged."

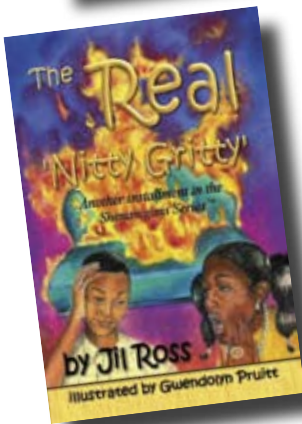
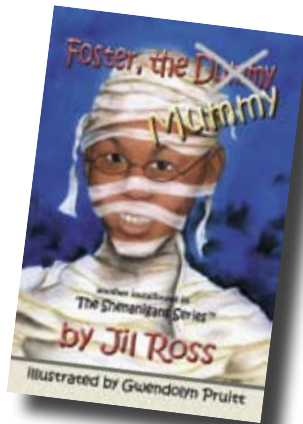
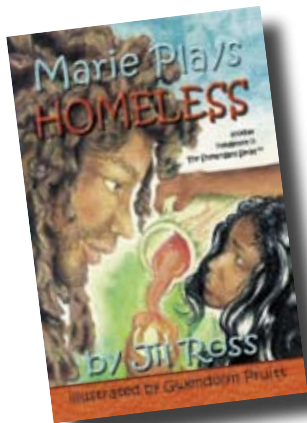
The process of going from creating a story and writing it to actually publishing her work was no easy feat for Ross. Ironically it was the voice of her son, then 11 years old, that kick-started her writing career. Her inspiration to write was two-fold -- a combination of keeping a promise and identifying a need in the Black community.

Ross kept promising her children that she would one day publish the *Shenanigans Series*, and share her vision with the world, but 10 years later, the books were still collecting dust.

In 2003, her son, who was struggling in school, laid down a challenge: "Mommy, if you're not going to do anything with your stories, just throw them away."

His statement, Ross says, was life changing for her. She saw the necessity to step up to her son's challenge and expectations. She also saw how important it was for her children to see her complete something.

In addition, she saw firsthand that parents really do lead by example. Luckily for children every-



After 21 years of working at United Airlines in various positions that support customer service and airport operations, Ross was given an opportunity in 2006 to take a leave from United. With the support of her family, she decided to take United up on its offer and has worked diligently since then to make the *Shenanigans Series* a household name. She participates in local book signings, fairs, and events that support literacy. She's also a certified vendor with Chicago Public Schools, City Colleges of Chicago and the Chicago Park District, and coordinates and participates in local book fairs and readings with organizations such as Bookworms, Kids Literacy Program for South Side YMCA, and Jack & Jill. Last April, she accepted an invitation to be interviewed by WNUA radio personality Stan West for *City Voices*, to discuss the book series and the importance of literacy, folktales, and storytelling in the African-American Community. And in addition to everything else, Ross speaks with students about the necessity and fundamentals of reading, writing and creative expression.

Ross holds a BA in psychology, and lives in Chicago with her husband and two children. Her books are available at Borders bookstore, on [bordersbooks.com](http://bordersbooks.com), [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), [target.com](http://target.com), [barnesandnoble.com](http://barnesandnoble.com), [wwwshenaniganseries.com](http://wwwshenaniganseries.com) and through Cedar Hill Publishing.

where, Ross stayed committed to her plan, and in 2003, published *Marie Plays Homeless*, the first book in the series.

By this time her children were 11 and 12 years old, and were so precocious that they'd given her plenty of subjects and stories to write about.

All of the stories are inspired by real-life events. Although the *Shenanigans Series* are humorous and entertaining, they also teach clear, but gently told life lessons.

In addition, they contain a vocabulary guide and questions that provoke group discussion and written responses.

Currently available titles in the **Shenanigans Series** are *Marie Plays Homeless*, *Foster the Mummy*, *What's the Matter, Mr. Ticklebritches?*, *The Real Nitty Gritty* and *The Blake Family Vacation*.

The next installment Ross is currently working on deals with the topic of bullying. "The story will contain humor but will still address the seriousness of this issue," she says.

"Two boys that are close to me were bullied, so I realize the seriousness of it, and that cannot be compromised." The book is due sometime in 2008.

"My future plans include making the book series available in audio form so that parents can give their children an option when riding in the car," she says.

"There is so much these days, not only in music content but even the commercials aired on the radio that is inappropriate for children. Children should be able to just be children and listen to clean, fun entertainment. I'm also planning on making the books available in Spanish translation." ■