



Andrea Davis Pinkney

“

Black empowerment was more than a slogan in our home. It was a deeply held belief that my parents, through their example instilled in their three children. To brand myself a product of the civil rights movement is no overstatement.

— Let it Shine: Black Women Freedom Fighters (1998)

”

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1963
- * African-American children's book author and editor
- * Her first published work was *Seven Candles for Kwanza*

Biography

Andrea Davis Pinkney was born on September 25, 1963 in Washington, D.C., the daughter of parents deeply involved in the civil rights movement. As a result, Pinkney was exposed to the movement at a young age and was even involved in the annual conference of the National Urban League during many of her summer vacations. The Civil Rights Movement played a large role in her childhood and its influence is visible in many of her books.

Pinkney did not originally aspire to be a children's book author and editor. As a child, she dreamed of writing for magazines. According to Pinkney, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was influential to her desire to become a writer. The main character of the show, Mary Richards, a big-city journalist, was an early role model to Pinkney. To achieve her dream, Pinkney majored in journalism at Syracuse University. After graduating in 1985, she began working as an editor at *Mechanics Illustrated*. She eventually became a senior editor for *Essence* magazine.



Andrea Davis Pinkney

Biography continued

Pinkney's switch to writing children's literature came as a result of encouragement from her husband, Brian Pinkney, a children's book illustrator whom she married in 1991. Noting that she often offered comments about manuscripts he reviewed, he encouraged her to write a children's book of her own. Several children's book collaborations between the two resulted, including *Dear Benjamin Banneker*, *Seven Candles for Kwanzaa*, and *Duke Ellington*.

Pinkney now lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she is managing editor for a new imprint under the Hyperion label called Jump at the Sun. The purpose of the Jump at the Sun label is to "celebrate the experiences of the African-American community while at the same time include books that go beyond a particular niche, that are for every child's pleasure" (Cooper, p. 2).

Children's literature can be a great tool to convey important messages to children without preaching at them. In an interview with Ilene Cooper and David Pitt, Pinkney stated that she noticed the lack of African-American literature geared toward and available to children (Cooper, 1). She decided to create something that would operate around their cultural norms and morals, something that would reflect their lives, their cultural heritage, and the achievements of African-American figures. Pinkney's books express the theme that any African-American can attain his or her goals with intelligence and hard work—even when faced with obstacles.

Dear Benjamin Banneker takes place during the late 18th century when slavery was legal and a whole group of people lived without rights. Benjamin Banneker was different from many black people of his time because he was free and educated. He taught himself mathematics and astronomy, and he would study after a hard day's work on the family farm. Most whites commonly believed that black people generally did not have the intellectual ability of white people and that black people had no use for mathematical knowledge. Banneker, however, knew differently. Pinkney writes, "Benjamin knew that all black people could study and learn as he had - if only they were free to do so" (20). Banneker applied his knowledge to create the first almanac ever written by a black man, but he faced opposition in getting it published because of the color of his skin. Banneker saw the injustice that plagued society, and rather than accepting it as a static condition, he wrote to Thomas Jefferson, the Secretary of State, about his concerns. Pinkney includes excerpts from both Banneker's letter to Jefferson and Jefferson's response to Banneker. By including this correspondence, Pinkney emphasizes the importance of speaking out when injustice is present.



Andrea Davis Pinkney

Biography continued

Dear Benjamin Banneker is written for an audience of children ages 7-9. Children any younger than seven might have trouble sitting through the entire story since most pages are weighted down by text and historical dates that might confuse and be of little importance to them. An ideal reader might be someone interested in African-American history and figures shaped by an intellectual identity. The book is ideal for book reports as it belongs to a specific genre of educational and historical repertoire. Two of Pinkney's other biographical books that tell of strong black characters who worked hard and overcame problems that African-Americans faced are *Duke Ellington* and *Let It Shine*. Both books contain beautiful illustrations. Brian Pinkney illustrated *Duke Ellington's* art, and Stephen Elkhorn illustrated that of *Let It Shine*.

Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra is a biography about the famous jazz artist, Duke Ellington. Ellington began composing music at a young age and called it "the music of his people." By 1943, Ellington and his orchestra were one of the first African-American bands playing for huge crowds at Carnegie Hall. It was at this time he performed his suite, "Black, Brown, and Beige." Children will be enthralled by the beautiful illustrations, which depict musical notes in all colors of the rainbow. They will also have fun reading the "jive" talk of the 1940s, which includes sayings like "Believe it, man" and refers to the piano as "ivory eighty-eights." This book is recommended for children ages 5-7.

Let it Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters is a book about ten strong black women who worked to advance civil rights. As stated in the book's introduction, Pinkney's goal in writing this book was to show readers the power these women possessed to make changes. She also wishes to encourage readers to stand up for their rights and the rights of others even when they face obstacles and disadvantages to create a better world. The women profiled include well-known women such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Rosa Parks, as well as others who are lesser-known, such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Ella Josephine Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer. The book is recommended for all ages, though it may not appeal to preschoolers and early school-agers because it does not have many pictures to illustrate the stories and is heavy on words.



Andrea Davis Pinkney

Biography continued

Pinkney presents another story that contains a strong main character in her chapter book, *Solo Girl*. Like *Benjamin Banneker*, the main character of *Solo Girl* works hard to overcome problems and achieve success. The book touches on themes of fitting-in, self-discovery, and the impact of a supportive family. Pinkney's story reflects the social structure of some African-American communities. Cass, the main character, has a unique family structure. Rather than the "typical" two parents and 2.5 children living in the suburbs, Cass lives with her foster mother, Ma Lettie, and twin brothers, Jackson and Bud, in the city. The family has just moved to a new neighborhood and Cass does not have any friends.

The girls her age jump rope in the summer, but as Cass puts it, "I'm a jump-rope loser. A klutz" (16). Nevertheless, she combats the difficulties of making new friends by utilizing her own talents. Cass is a math whiz, and with encouragement from her family, she learns to apply her "numbers gift" to the new skill of jumping rope. Cass also befriends Pearl, one of the girls with the hottest feet in the neighborhood. Pearl has trouble with her math lessons, and as Cass coaches Pearl in math, Pearl helps Cass discipline her feet. *Solo Girl* is also intended for children 7-9. This piece of fiction could be used for a book report or a young reader's first effort at reading a chapter book. It is a simple and fun read due to its fast paced events that lead to Cass' integration into the jump rope group and its age-appropriate dialogue, as exemplified through the following exchange:

"You know what the matter is," said Cass. "I'm a jump-rope loser. A klutz." "And I'm the king of England," said Jackson. "And I'm the queen of France," Bud said. "You're acting stupid," Cass said, sucking her teeth. "You're acting stupid, times two," said Jackson.

Silent Thunder, *Raven in a Dove House* and *Hold Fast to Dreams* are coming of age stories in chapter book format, and are intended for readers ages 9-12. Each book focuses on the life of a black girl who begins discovering the world around her, how it affects her, and where she fits into it. While *Raven* and *Silent Thunder* are fictional, *Hold Fast* is partially autobiographical. The stories of *Raven* and *Hold Fast* take place in 1990's American culture, whereas *Silent Thunder* takes place during the era of the American Civil War. Each story confronts some of the respective society's issues.



Andrea Davis Pinkney

Biography continued

Silent Thunder: A Civil War Story revolves around Summer, an eleven-year-old slave on a plantation and her thirteen-year-old brother Roscoe. Summer wonders who her father is, why she cannot have a doll like the other girls, and why it is a secret that she is learning to read. Roscoe, wanting to escape slavery forever, struggles with the idea of freedom. This book shows the pain of suppressed desires, as the slaves are not able to fully express themselves where they have no rights. It is an eye-opening experience for a young reader as they realize the daily struggles of plantation life before the Emancipation Proclamation.

Raven in a Dove House is a novel that deals with the issue of children and guns, a timely and pertinent topic for children today. The exciting and emotional story centers on twelve-year-old Nell. Every summer Nell, who lives with her father in New York City, spends the summer with her Aunt Ursa and cousin Foley in a small town in upstate New York. The trip is usually peaceful and fun, but this summer is different. Nell spends her time with Foley and his friend Slade. Life becomes complicated for Nell when Foley and Slade ask her to hide a Raven .25 caliber handgun in her dollhouse. The story deals with Nell's internal conflict over hiding the gun, societal pressures placed on teens, and her feelings about her father's romantic relationship with another woman following the death of her own mother.

Hold Fast to Dreams is a story narrated by Deirdre Willis, a girl in seventh grade who has just moved from Baltimore, Maryland, where all the families in her community black, to Wexford, Connecticut, where all the families are white. Her only knowledge about white people came from her best friend in Baltimore, who says that all white people are mean and snobby. Like the main character in *Solo Girl*, Dee faces the obstacle of fitting into a new town. Dee finds that she must also get beyond her own prejudices towards whites. In her new school Dee tries to fit in by participating in the predominant sport in Wexford: lacrosse. Since she cannot make sense of the lacrosse skills and her allergies flare up every time she runs on the field, Dee finds another outlet of shared interests, photography. This talent becomes her key to recognition in school. Throughout her transition into the new school and community, Dee learns that she is strong enough to make it under the difficult circumstances of the strange town.



Andrea Davis Pinkney

Biography continued

Seven Candles for Kwanzaa is unlike Pinkney's other books of fiction and biography. It is a holiday book aimed to educate and inform readers about the African-American celebration of Kwanzaa. The book discusses the preparatory tasks and a day-by-day account of the events and principles of this weeklong celebration. Swahili is the language of Kwanzaa, and Pinkney includes Swahili words and pronunciations of the holiday and their English translations. In her introduction to the book, where she also discusses the origin of the holiday, Pinkney writes, "Seven principles are at the heart of Kwanzaa, and these are based on the gathering together of family, the commemoration of the ancestors, the rededication to the growth of the community, and the offering of gratitude for life's good." *Seven Candles for Kwanzaa* is recommended for children ages 5-9; though readers of every age can learn much about the celebration of Kwanzaa from this book.

Through her engaging narrative, Pinkney speaks to her audiences without sermonizing to them. Her fiction employs believable characters, and her non-fiction uses real people who set positive examples and are ideal icons for young people. Pinkney has filled a gap that previously existed in children's literature by creating a selection of literature for children that provides images of strong black people in America.

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

Ella Fitzgerald: The Tale of a Vocal Virtuosa (2002).

Mim's Christmas Jam (2001).

Dear Mr. President: Abraham Lincoln: Letters from a Slave Girl (2001).

Let it Shine! Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters (2000).

Silent Thunder: A Civil War Story (1999).

Raven in a Dove House (1998).

Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and his Orchestra (1998).

Watch Me Dance (1997).

Shake Shake Shake (1997).



Andrea Davis Pinkney

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author continued

- Solo Girl* (1997).
Pretty Brown Face (1997).
I Smell Honey (1997).
Bill Pickett, Rodeo Ridin' Cowboy (1996).
Hold Fast to Dreams (1995).
Dear Benjamin Banneker (1994).
Alvin Ailey (1993).
Seven Candles for Kwanza (1993).

Works about the author

- African-American Voices and Visions: biographies of some of our most prestigious authors and illustrators* (Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers, 1999).
Bishop, Rudine Simes. "The Pinkney Family: In the Tradition" (*The Horn Book Magazine*, 1996).
Britton, Jason. "Disney Restructures Kid's Book Group" (*Publisher's Weekly*, 2000).
"Children's Books Celebrate Black History, Culture" (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 2001).
Cooper, Ilene and David Pitt. "The Booklist Interview" (*Booklist*, 1999).
Giorgis, Cyndi, et al. "Visual Literacy" (*The Reading Teacher*, 1999).
Freeman, Evelyn B., Barbara A. Lehman, Patricia L. Scharer. "Time" (*The Reading Teacher*, 1999).
"Hyperion Launches Black Heritage Imprint called Jump at the Sun" (Book Publishing Press, 1998).
"Kids and Books" (*NEA Today*, 1994).
Murphy, Barbara Thrash. *Black Authors and Illustrators of Books for Children and Young Adults: a biographical dictionary* (Garland Publishing, 1999).
"Past and Present Come Alive in Timely Books for Children" (*The Columbus Dispatch*, 2001).
Pendergast, Sara and Tom Pendergast, eds. *St James Guide to Children's Writers* (St. James Press, 1999).
Rand, Donna, Toni Trent Parker, and Sheila Foster. *Black Books Galore!: Guide to Great African-American Children's Books* (Wiley Press, 1998).