

May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture

Rejoice the Legacy!

Andrea Davis Pinkney



Photo by Christine Simmons

Andrea Davis Pinkney

Andrea Davis Pinkney is the New York Times bestselling and award-winning author of many books for children and young adults. She is the recipient of several Coretta Scott King Book Award citations, the Boston Globe/Horn Book Honor Award, and the Parenting Publication Gold Medal. Andrea is Vice President, Executive Editor at Scholastic. She was named one of the "25 Most Influential Black Women in Business" by the Network Journal, and is among "The 25 Most Influential People in Our Children's Lives" cited by Children's Health magazine.

The May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture was presented May 3, 2014, at the University of Minnesota Children's Literature Research Collections on the university's West Bank Campus.

Good evening, beautiful people!

I am so happy to be here. Thank you, May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Committee. Thank you to our National Ambassador for Young People's Literature and this year's Newbery medal recipient, the amazing Kate DiCamillo. And a very special thanks to Lisa Von Drasek, curator of the Children's Literature Research Collections of the University of Minnesota Libraries, and her colleagues at Archives and Special Collections at the University of Minnesota. You have worked hard wrangling the many facets of this event. This evening would not be this evening without you.

During the months leading up to tonight, I repeatedly asked myself a very important question: *What does one wear to deliver the May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture?* This is a vital consideration because perceptions are important.

Earrings. Jacket. Skirt. And then the hardest question of all: *What shoes should I put on my feet?* Sneakers are comfortable, but ugly. Snow boots? After all, this is Minnesota. But UGGS don't seem to strike the right Arbuthnot tone. I don't own a pair of Jimmy Choos. And besides, they are too pinchy. So I consulted with my college-bound daughter, who is the creative director of her own style magazine and a fashion blogger.

Chloe advised that I keep it simple. At her suggestion, I settled on my favorite red heels. My ruby slippers, I call them. It may seem a trivial pursuit, but for us girls in the room, shoes *are* important. For this girl, the height of the shoe is even more critical. And speaking of height, here is a secret that is not to leave this room. It's a small detail that wasn't mentioned in tonight's introduction because I don't like a lot of people to know it.

The fact is, I am a mere 4-feet 11-inches tall. I deliberately wore heels this evening to boost me up. I put on these special shoes to give me a lift, thinking

that if I were taller I could somehow better rise to this occasion. But I see now that I could have left my heels back in Brooklyn, New York, where I live.

When I look out at all of you, I realize that I don't need big shoes to get a boost. So many of you folks who work with children and literature understand what it's like when a person feels small and needs a lift. You understand this because as believers in the power of reading and kids, you have what it takes to make a person feel a million feet tall. The very essence of that idea lifts me up very high.

I'd like to start with a story.

Once, a very long time ago, there was a girl. That girl could not read. That girl could hardly write. Even though that girl would soon enter middle school, she was afraid of books. That girl did not *want* to read. Many people shook their heads.



"Oh, no," said some of the girl's teachers. "She cannot read."

"Oh, no," said the girl's friends. "She can hardly write."

For this child, the prospect of reading was a terror monster, lurking, waiting to gobble her up. Books—so scary. Books—so frightening.

Reading—the worst bogeyman ever, whose claws and paws presented doom.

"Oh, no," said the girl. "I am so afraid. I do not *want* to learn."

People just kept shaking their heads.

"Oh, no, no, no . . ."

Many folks had turned into nonbelievers whenever they talked about this child. And then something wonderful happened.

"Oh, yes!" said the girl's mother and father. "We will find you the *right* books."

The girl and her parents met a librarian at Stedwick Elementary School. This librarian took one look at the girl and, with her parents, went on a mission to find this child books that would appeal to her. The books were simple at first. They were way below this child's grade-level, but they ignited the girl's desire to read. One of her favorites was *Hop on Pop* by Dr. Seuss. To her, *Hop on Pop* wasn't reading. *Hop on Pop* was poetry. It was wordplay. It was singing!

ALL TALL. We all are tall.
ALL SMALL. We all are small.
ALL BALL. We all play ball.
BALL WALL. Up on a wall.
DAY PLAY. We play all day.

It was around this time that the girl's mother and father, and the girl, discovered something known as the myth of genius.

The myth of genius is that one must be a genius to read well and to love books. In time, the girl soon learned that a genius is someone who can excel when he or she is given the *right* book.

Now, in addition to my confession of being a mere 4-feet 11-inches tall, there's something else I want to share with you. And this is not a secret. I share this with folks when I feel it can be useful. That girl who could not read or write well; that child who was so afraid of books; that kid who made so many nonbelievers shake their heads saying, "Oh, no, no, no!"

That girl is standing here today.

And I am nodding my head and saying, "Oh, yes! Oh, yeah!"

I'm the luckiest girl in the world because a very special librarian showed me the way. I don't remember her name, but that doesn't matter. She was a Fairy God Librarian. We've all heard of a Fairy Godmother. But here was a Fairy God Librarian. That Fairy God Librarian helped me understand the true meaning of Theodor Geisel's genius:

ALL TALL. We ALL are tall.

* * * * *

I want to now fast forward to October 2012. My Scholastic friend and colleague, John Mason, Director of Education/Library Marketing for Scholastic's Trade publishing division, emailed me several times urgently saying that he needed to speak to me in person. This was in the midst of Hurricane Sandy. We on the East Coast had limited power and were not able to go to work. Thankfully, my Brooklyn neighborhood had light, heat, and electricity, but I was still forced to stay at home. And those



Andrea's family, the Davises, pictured here circa 1947, ignited the author's appreciation for home-grown storytelling. Andrea's father is the child in the jacket and tie.

emails from John kept coming—*Ping! Ping! Ping! Andrea, I must speak with you. It's urgent!*

I emailed back—*John, our offices are closed. Let's speak as soon as we return to work.*

I then started to worry. *John*, I emailed again. *Is something wrong?*

John's reply: *I need to speak to you in person on Monday morning.*

But even though the Scholastic offices would reopen, I was not to be at work that Monday morning due to another engagement. Finally, on Monday afternoon, I got to the office, feeling nervous about speaking to John. I had just come from an event held by the National Center for Learning Disabilities, honoring students who, like me, had struggled in school. Yet despite their struggles with reading and writing, these students had excelled, thanks to committed teachers and parents and Fairy God Librarians who made sure they got the books they needed.

I spent much of that Monday relating to those kids. And as the mother of two brilliant dyslexic children, I had been so deeply moved by the plights and triumphs of the kids I'd just met that I arrived at the office feeling emotionally flooded. I walked into work carrying my salad bar salad, which I had quickly picked up in a rush to meet with John.

When John and I finally got in the same room together, John told me that I'd been invited to deliver the May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture and that the Arbuthnot selection committee needed to know right away if I would accept the invitation. I was sitting down. My salad was still in its plastic box, which was

inside a cellophane bag. I looked at John and blinked. I then did something that was uncharacteristic of me in an office setting—I burst into tears. Poor John Mason! He seemed so excited to tell me the news, and here I was presenting him with a puddle.

John said, “Andrea, what’s in your salad?”

I cried, “Lettuce, John. And turkey.”

John said, “Andrea, you look like you need some protein. Why don’t you start with the turkey, and I’ll come back later.”

John quietly closed my door to leave me alone with my salad bar turkey. At first, I chalked up my reaction to low blood sugar, but quickly realized my tears were a soupy mix of joy and sadness. The great irony of that moment! That I had just come from a room filled with young people for whom reading was a terror monster bogeyman, lurking, waiting to gobble them up. But didn’t, thanks to so many caring people like many of you here tonight. And now I was being invited to deliver a lecture in the name of May Hill Arbuthnot, who, for so many of us, provided a door to reading.

I took John’s suggestion. I ate the turkey first. And I kept crying. Soon, I wasn’t the one doing the crying; the *crying* was doing me. It had overtaken me to such a degree that I was unable to stop.

I was somehow immediately plunged into a kind of time warp, taken back to first, second, and third grade, and to the humiliation of round robin reading that requires each child to decode a passage out loud, in turn. I remember the stammering that I endured, the jagged delivery—“Bro-o-o-th-th-er . . .”

This was compounded by the fact that I was the only African American student in that classroom, and as such, I suffered from a syndrome I’ve come to know as “anxious apartness.”

Thank goodness for my life at home, when, after school, I entered a different world—a world of stories and storytelling. And parents and grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins who read books that meant so much to them and would come to mean so much to me. And who told stories all the time.

When I turned eight, Mom and Dad, who were always ready to debunk the myth of genius, presented me with a collection of colorful notebooks.

“Here they are!” my daddy said. Yes, there they were. The beginning of the end of isolation. Stories that I could tell to

my notebooks and not worry about grammar or decoding or classroom round robin in front of other kids who were reading fluently.

Back then, they said, “Children should be seen, and not heard.” That was fine with me. The quieter I was, the more I could see and hear grown-ups saying and doing things they might not have said or done if they’d known all of it was going into one of my notebooks. There were stories at the dinner table, at the picnic table, at the fellowship table after church, where they served doughnuts and coffee.

Here are the kinds of things I observed and heard. Stories often started with: “*Remember that time?*”

My Uncle Rich: “*Remember that time Martin Luther King Jr. came up in here, spent the afternoon at our church? Told us there would be a March on Washington. Happened too. Two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand people. That was some march. I can still see Martin. And I can see your daddy, just a-smiling.*”

My Grandmother Marjorie: “*Remember the night Joe Louis won that boxing championship? We all listened to it on Uncle Jimmy’s radio. Huddled ’round that old static-y thing. Grown men commenced to crying tears of joy at the victory of a black mother’s son.*”

My Cousin John: “*Remember when they integrated the schools? Everything changed after that. Sittin’ in math class next to a white kid. Uh-huh—that was something else, wasn’t it? New books. New pencils. The beginning of a new day.*”

These stories were sweeter than candy, and I devoured them.

Children should be seen and not heard? No problem. I’ll be as quiet as a mouse. Keep on talking, grown-ups; I’ve got it all here in my notebooks. When you’re a child with paper and a pencil, stories stick. The end of the myth of genius was manifesting. Was I genius? No way. Was I becoming a storyteller and a writer?

Yes.

When I was a little girl, my family called me by my middle name—Rae. Add to this, the loving sobriquet, “Rae-dy Roo.”

One day, my Uncle Howard sidled up to me quietly. “Hey, Rae-dy Roo. What you got in that notebook?”

“Nothin’.”

Children should be seen and not heard? No problem. I’ll be as quiet as a mouse. Keep on talking, grown-ups; I’ve got it all here in my notebooks. When you’re a child with paper and a pencil, stories stick. The end of the myth of genius was manifesting. Was I genius? No way. Was I becoming a storyteller and a writer?
Yes.

He looked at me sidelong. “What kinda nothin’?”

“No kinda nothin’!”

It was around this time that I made a quiet confession, but only to myself: *I want to be a writer. Like John Boy on the TV show The Waltons. I want to do what John Boy does. Write about things that happen in my family. Things I see and notice.*

I know many people bemoan television. But for me, TV was part of the path to becoming a writer and a publisher.

Thanks to TV, my quiet confession had a Part Two, which I also confided in no one, for fear that it was unattainable.

I want to be . . . just like . . . Mary Richards on The Mary Tyler Moore Show. I want to live in a big city. I want to be a career woman. I want my own apartment. I want to have a best friend just like Mary's best friend, Rhoda Morgenstern.

If I could have ripped off the front of the television and climbed onto Walton's Mountain on Thursday nights and then on Saturdays jumped onto the set of

WJM, the television station where the character Mary Richards worked as a broadcast journalist, I would have done it. Because those were the two dreams that I'd scribbled in my notebook: *I wanted to be a journalist who writes.*

I didn't know any writers or journalists or single career women who lived in big cities with their own apartments, but that's what I wanted to become more than anything. It's ironic that I'm here tonight with all of you in Mary Richards' hometown of Minneapolis.

I'm not sure of it, but looking back, I can't help but wonder if members of my family somehow got ahold of my notebooks and passed them around amongst themselves. Because though I was always hearing stories, and though my parents' home and the homes of my relatives were flooded with books, all of a sudden, Mommy, Daddy, Uncle Howard, Aunt Theodora, and my cousin Larry, who was a newspaper reporter, were pushing even more books on me and talking to me about becoming a writer. They told me that writers are people who read, and that if I were to become a writer, I needed to read. A lot.

I was now about nine years old, and though I'd made many strides in school, the reading terror monster still lurked. If reading well was part of the equation, I felt doomed to failure as a writer. Then, one day, Daddy said, “You gotta know where you came from, little girl.”

And my Uncle Howard said, “Rae-dy Roo, you need a lesson in how our people wrote and read and spoke and expressed what we needed to be said. Because some day, little girl, you will read and write and speak and express what needs to be said.”

My family's acknowledgment of the roots of African American writing and storytelling is something I've grown to call The Fine Black Line.

Ah, yes, The Fine Black Line—the legacy of African American storytelling and the writers who have set the path for African American literature.

FOUR STARS!

In Sudan, one small gift changes a girl's destiny.

THE RED PENCIL

BY NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY
ILLUSTRATED BY CORETTA SCOTT KING AWARD WINNER
SHANE W. EVANS

★ “Inspirational.”—*Booklist* ★ “Soulful.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

★ “Deeply affecting.”—*Publishers Weekly*

★ “Stunning.”—*School Library Journal*

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Fine—as in, of the utmost quality.

Fine—as in, of the greatest achievement.

Fine—as in, well done.

Line—as in, a lineage. An ongoing tradition. A legacy.

My parents and relatives explained that The Fine Black Line began when, on a dark night, a people were called and taken from Mother Africa to a new place that was unknown, scary, threatening. Their struggle was set forth in stories.

And because black people were forbidden the opportunity to read or write, stories along The Fine Black Line were first told through the rhythms of talking drums, which then became “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” which, over time, moved along The Fine Black Line to abolition to freedom and to a Renaissance set in Harlem.

Soon that Fine Black Line became a pen stroke. Words rendered on pages. Stories read by mothers to their sons and fathers to their daughters, expressing the lineage of a people, and creating a heritage of black writers.

And that Fine Black Line, in a broad, loud stroke of *Here I am!* made its mark with “Wade in the Water” and “We Shall Overcome” and “I Have a Dream.”

And The Fine Black Line of the utmost quality became “Yes we can!”

As a child, The Fine Black Line made perfect sense to me. In addition to being avid readers, my parents were civil rights activists, who spent weekends marching, sometimes with Dr. King himself. But mostly they protested with simple folk, just like themselves, everyday people, walking toward what they hoped would be a better tomorrow. Summer vacations for my sister, my brother, and me, were spent each July at the NAACP Annual Convention and the National Urban League Conference, where we listened to equality speeches by civil rights notables.

While other kids were at the beach or summer camp, we were having “fun in the sun” with the NAACP and National Urban League.

September marked back to school for lots of kids. But for us, it meant traveling to Washington, DC. for the Congressional Black Caucus Conference, a gathering of individuals who addressed the legislative concerns of people of color and presented

them to Congress. The Congressional Black Caucus Conference somehow always seemed to fall on my birthday at the end of September. There were many years I blew out the candles on my birthday cake, then later that very same day, attended a civil rights rally with my family. So, affirming the power of African American writing, oratory, reflection, and call to action are in my blood.

* * * *

When you're asked to deliver the May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture, you need to provide a title for your speech. After thinking about it, I came up with “Rejoice the Legacy.” As those who work with books and literacy, we have a lot to celebrate. So tonight let's do that. Honey, this is a party. And we are here to make it a joyous occasion.

I heard those words from my mother on my tenth birthday: “Honey, this is a party!” Yes, from my mother who sensed that her child needed further exposure to the literature that existed along The Fine Black Line.

Mommy, who knew. Mommy, a middle school English teacher and the first woman in our family to go to college. Mommy, who saw the eager eyes of her eldest child. Mommy, who stared down the bogeyman terror monster of reading. Mommy, who said to me, “Honey, let's start at the beginning of those who wrote and spoke.”

And so we did. We began with slavery's expression along The Fine Black Line. We started with *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the autobiography authored by abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass who faced his own terror monster. For the most part, Frederick taught himself to read and write at a time when it was illegal and dangerous for black people to do

so. There is a passage in Frederick Douglass's autobiography in which Frederick describes his coming to terms with his circumstances and with the nature of slavery, and how learning to read helped him better understand the intolerable institution of enslavement.

In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick says simply:

“The more I read, the more I was led . . .”¹

Think for a moment about the positive power of reading from an enslaved person's point of view—“*The more I read, the more I was led . . .*”

For someone shackled by slavery's weight, words on a page, a narrative, stories in a book, present a kind of Promised Land that welcomes everyone. Once you sink into those words and roll around in them, and let *them* roll around in *you*, that is freedom. And that was the gift I received when Daddy and Mommy and my uncles and cousins brought me along on The Fine Black Line. I was granted the freedom to be and go anyplace I wished. Like Frederick Douglass, *The more I read, the more I was led.*

My family kept leading me to the works of African American authors whose brilliance, whose bold pen strokes, spoke loudly and clearly.

When I was in middle school, Mommy presented me with the works of poets Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar and to the writings of Richard Wright. Then one day, something extraordinary happened. I came upon the brilliance of Harlem Renaissance novelist, essayist, and playwright Zora Neale Hurston, a black *woman* writer. And I stumbled upon her essay entitled, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," which describes her experience of growing up in Eatonville, Florida.

It was as if that very title expressed my entire psychic condition up to that moment. Zora Neale Hurston, whose mother, like my own, quickly shot down the myth of genius. Zora's mother who told young Zora to jump at the sun, to reach for all that is possible.

Yes, there I was, a twelve-year-old African American girl, who had discovered something life-changing: the writings of Zora Neale Hurston—a stroke of beauty, gliding, striving, shouting her truth, along The Fine Black Line. Thanks, in part, to Zora, I had begun to recover from anxious apartness. Thanks to Zora Neale Hurston, this aspiring sixth-grade writer could start to articulate *how it feels to be colored me.*

* * * *

In preparing this lecture, in coming to learn about the important and incredible contributions of May Hill Arbuthnot and the legacy she has left behind, I could not help but wonder, *What if May Hill Arbuthnot and Zora Neale Hurston, who were contemporaries, ran into each other at a Columbia University alumni party?*²

This is plausible. After all, both women were students at Columbia University around the same time. I imagine that when they met up it would all be very comfortable. Very friendly. I'm told that May Hill Arbuthnot was easygoing. Down to earth. Good people. And Zora, well, she was the same way. And brassy, too.

So, there they would be, two women with their fingers on the pulse of literacy. With their hearts in the right place. I don't know if May Hill Arbuthnot and Zora Neale Hurston ever met each other in real life, but for the sake of this fiction I will imagine they did know each other, and that when their paths crossed, it was instant soul sisterhood.

Let us imagine for a moment, they are meeting up right now:

Zora: *Whooo-hooo. Look who's here—May Hill Arbuthnot! Honey, these eyes are glad to see you. Girl, you do look good. Seems like you did something new to your hair, May. Like you went and found yourself some kind of special hair dresser. And those glasses—they're sayin' somethin'. They become you, May.*

May: *Zora Neale Hurston! You look pretty nice yourself. That hat is stunning on you. Beautiful. And your skin. You haven't aged a day, Zora.*

Zora: *Here we are, May, at the Columbia University Alumni Association reunion. Do you come to these things on a regular basis?*

May: *Oh, Zora, I wish I could. I've been fast at work on my textbook, entitled Children and Books. I'm told it's become a classic of higher education and is still to this day used widely in children's literature classes.*

Zora: *Honey, I know that book has kept you busy, and I can relate. I've been all wrapped up in my novel. Don't know if you heard of it. It's called Their Eyes Were Watching God. And get this. Folks tell me Their Eyes Were Watching God is required reading. Isn't that somethin', May? Me, a little brown-sugar colored girl from Eatonville, Florida—required reading!*

May: *I have certainly heard of your novel, Zora. And your plays. And your study of anthropology. We've come a long way since the days when we were both students at Columbia University. Me, earning a master's degree, graduating as part of the class of 1924. You, coming onto campus shortly after that, seeking a degree in anthropology. Hard to believe we never met once at Columbia. Looking back, though, Zora, that was an exciting period . . . I remember like it was yesterday. . . . If I'm not mistaken . . . the first Black History Week was established right around then . . . in . . . 1926?*

Zora: *That's right, May. Black History Week. We were all so proud. That was something. It's Black History Month now. And guess what, May. They got my picture on one of those Black History Month calendars they give out at McDonald's when you buy something called a Happy Meal.*

May: *A Happy Meal, Zora? Really?*

Zora: *Really, May. And let me tell you. I've had one of those burgers and fries in a box. Between you and me and this rug we're standing on, the meal did not make me happy. But the Black History Month calendar with my picture on it did make me smile.*

May: *You deserve a calendar, Zora. You know what? I hear they've got a lecture named after me. A lecture, Zora. The May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture.*

Zora: *You deserve that, May. With all you've done to further the importance of children's literature. Now, let me make sure I'm not mistaken. Did I just read in American Libraries magazine that you were chosen as one of the "100 Most Important Leaders we had for the Twentieth Century"?*

I'm often asked to speak in underserved communities. And I'm sometimes warned by the organizers that: (1) Not a lot of people will come; (2) This part of town doesn't really read; and (3) We don't really see a lot of them in the library. I've heard these caveats so many times. I call it the "we'd just like to warn you" speech. But this never bothers me because I've learned that books and stories bring people out of their houses. When I arrive at the event, I see people who have indeed come out of their homes because of the power of stories.

May: *That's right, Zora. Me, May Hill Arbuthnot, a kindergarten teacher from Mason City, Iowa. Zora, I'm surprised our paths never crossed at Columbia University, back in the day. Why do you think that is?*

Zora: *A sign of the times, May. That was a sign of the times.*

And then, the two women would say goodbye. They would express their mutual admiration and affection, as so many of us do at a party: *Hug, kiss. Cheek, cheek. Sweet. Zora and May.*

* * * *

While May Hill Arbuthnot and Zora Neale Hurston were busily working to foster literacy, there were side-by-side movements to encourage children to read and to express themselves through the written word. The NAACP's children's magazine the *Brownies' Book*, launched by scholar and activist W. E. B. DuBois, was igniting the imaginations of African American children and allowing them to see themselves reflected in stories for young people.

May Hill Arbuthnot's popular Dick and Jane series was turning nonreaders into consumers of words and their power. Reading aloud became an essential tool for reading fluency. In the inaugural May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture, May herself discussed the importance of self-expression through reading out loud. May Hill Arbuthnot spent many years bringing children and books together by way of the spoken word.

* * * *

By 1980, when I was in high school, I had added Zora Neale Hurston to my list of people who had something that appealed to me. Something I could aspire to. My aspiration list now read as follows:

1. John Boy Walton: Writing about his family life.
2. Zora Neale Hurston: Black woman writer. Creator of "How It Feels to Be Colored Me."
3. Mary Richards: Journalist, career woman. Lives in a big city. Has her own apartment.
4. Mommy and Daddy: Civil rights foot soldiers.

How I was to blend all of these hopes and dreams, I had no clue. Latching first onto Mary Tyler Moore, I decided I would become

a journalist. I enrolled at the Newhouse School for Public Communications, the journalism school at Syracuse University, where my childhood experience of carrying notebooks with me wherever I went was affirmed.

One of the first lessons you learn as a journalist is to have a pocket filled with ideas—to always be on the hunt for story angles and approaches and to be ready to present your ideas at any moment. I also learned that writers write daily, no matter what. One of my professors, whose name was John Keats, after the English poet, explained that real writers write every single day of their lives, even holidays, your birthday, weekends, and when you just don't feel like it. It was explained that if I were to become a true writer, I would need to write when my throat hurts, when my car wouldn't start, when my child is sick, or my dog wets the carpet. Or when I'm tired.

Journalism school also underscored what my family had taught me—writers read. At Syracuse University, I was encouraged to read everything. This included things I like and things I don't. John Keats told me to go out of my comfort zone—to read books that appeal to me least and to learn from that experience. I also discovered that creators of nonfiction must go to the ends of the earth to nail down facts and to conduct full-scale research. Finally, journalism school taught me that each and every one of us has a story to tell and that our individual stories matter.

With that in mind, one day at age nineteen, I sat down, and, on a Smith Corona electric typewriter, I channeled John Boy Walton and Zora Neale Hurston and wrote an opinion piece about growing up in Wilton, Connecticut, where my family was one of two African American families.

As I wrote, I thought of Zora's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." I crafted the narrative, never thinking it would matter to anyone else *but* me. However, as John Keats advised, when you share your writing, it may touch someone, or help someone, or change someone. And so, on a lark, I yanked the pages out from the spool on the typewriter, folded the bulky stack into a too-tight envelope, and wrote on the front THE NEW YORK TIMES, 229 West 43rd St. New York, NY 10036.

I didn't know anybody at the *New York Times*, so the envelope had no name on it. A week later, I got a call. "Hi, this is so-and-so from the *New York Times*. We received your short story," the



Andrea and Brian are the husband and wife creative team behind award-winning children's books. She writes, he illustrates. Here at home in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, they have a daughter and son together.

man said. "We'd like to publish it this Sunday." The man then said, "We can only pay you seventy-five dollars."

I said, "Sir, I will pay *you* seventy-five dollars to publish my story in the *New York Times*." When the piece ran, people started to write in about it, others who had experienced *how it feels to be colored me*, and I quickly realized that I was not alone in this feeling.

I graduated from journalism school, and one month later, moved to New York City in search of a job. In true Mary Tyler Moore fashion, I went to the busiest corner of midtown Manhattan and I tossed my beret in the air!

After a series of editing jobs at small trade magazines, I eventually found myself at *Essence* magazine, the leading consumer publication for African American women. I was a senior editor, and I was charged to create an ongoing series of children's book reviews of books by black authors and featuring black characters. Because *Essence* is a magazine for black women, I became obsessed with black women who were writing for young people. There was Virginia Hamilton's plot brilliance. Eloise Greenfield's poetic genius. Patricia C. McKissack's storytelling prowess. Mildred Taylor's authentic narrative voice.

But back then in 1989, after I'd gone through all the books by Virginia Hamilton and Eloise Greenfield and Patricia C. McKissack and Mildred Taylor, and then went on to the canon of black men who were filling the genre—Walter Dean Myers, and the like—I couldn't amply fill the *Essence* magazine children's book section with enough content. For black kids, The Fine Black Line was very faint. Where were the picture-book biographies? Where were popular series for teens? Where were board books for babies? I was hard pressed to find these.

I will never forget the day I received a memo from Susan L. Taylor, the editor in chief of *Essence*, in regards to my responsibility to produce those pages in the magazine. This was before



Left, Caldecott winner, Jerry Pinkney and his wife, author Gloria Jean Pinkney, Andrea's "parents-in-love." Right, Andrea and Brian Pinkney join them in Jerry's art studio.

email, so I got a piece of paper in my in box. The memo said, simply, "Andrea, remember your charge."

That is when I started to nag the man who was then my boyfriend, Brian Pinkney. Brian was beginning his career as a children's book illustrator. Publishers were sending him manuscripts for consideration. I knew nothing of how children's publishing worked, and I would relentlessly bug Brian by saying things like, "Call up your publishers, and tell them we need a commercial series for black girls. Tell them we need picture-book biographies. We need board books for babies. We need contemporary fiction. And has anybody really addressed topics such as skin color in a way that is accessible to young readers?"

Brian grew so sick of me, he one day blurted, "Why don't *you* write the books! And, Andrea, by the way, what you're doing—coming up with ideas for books—is what those children's book editors do. *You* should write books, and *you* should be a children's book editor."

It's a wonder Brian Pinkney ever asked me to marry him because when he made these suggestions, I flicked them away and huffed, "Mary Tyler Moore never wrote a children's book and not once in her career did she work as a children's book editor!"

But I pocketed my pride and started writing picturebook manuscripts about topics that were of special interest to me—biographies about people like Alvin Ailey and Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald. I found great joy in bringing these stories to young readers and have now collaborated with Brian on many books, as well as writing novels and works of narrative nonfiction.

In this process, I've received another wonderful gift. I've been welcomed into what I call my "family-in-love." My *other* family whose passion and commitment for bringing books to children is an unshakable foundation built on the faith that books for all children are important, necessary, and worthy. This "family-in-love" continues to teach me, to guide me, to shine a light on

this path that we now travel together. It is a journey we share as children's book creators.

The power of a black family is a beautiful thing. My “mother-in-love,” Gloria Jean Pinkney, and my “Daddy-Lion father-in-love,” Jerry Pinkney—between them creators of more than one hundred books for children—are among the most beautiful people God put on this planet.

* * * *

As I was beginning to write books, I had a chance meeting with Willa Perlman, who, at that time, was president and publisher of Simon & Schuster's Children's Books Division. I told her what I'd been telling Brian all those years. That there needs to be a commercial book series for black girls, board books for babies, picture-book biographies, accessible stories about civil rights history. Willa offered me a job soon after that. Again, I was spouting off, but I knew nothing of children's publishing. I had no clue of how one actually made a children's book.

Ironically, the memo from my boss at *Essence*—“Andrea, remember your charge.”—encouraged me to leave *Essence* magazine to accept Willa Perlman's offer to start as an editor at Simon & Schuster, where, with the help of many patient people—among them, Stephanie Owens Lurie who is here tonight—I got help in learning the nuts and bolts of how a children's book is created.

It was around this time that I started to imagine what it might be like to have an entire list of books for African American children. What if I was to take W. E. B. DuBois's example in publishing the *Brownies' Book* magazine for the NAACP and create a branded entity, an entire imprint of children's book titles that featured African American authors and storytelling in a range of formats and genres, for a mix of age groups and reading tastes?

I truly believe that if you build it they will come. My hopes and dreams were starting to build something I couldn't fully articulate or imagine back then. It's strange when I think about it now. Because, as this dream percolated, Lisa Holton, a publishing visionary who I'd never met but had certainly heard of, approached me. She asked if I was familiar with the expression “jump at the sun,” an affirmation Zora Neale Hurston's mother had instilled in her.

That is when the stars aligned, and Lisa, who was heading up Disney Publishing Worldwide, invited me to come to Hyperion Books for Children to work with her in the launching of a new African American imprint called Jump at the Sun.

And jump, I did. Head first. Fast. Eagerly.

Because the Jump at the Sun imprint was the new kid on the block, more than anything, I wanted to find new writers. Where was that *Essence* magazine reader who had something to say to young people? So I dug. And dug. And dug. Into what is known in publishing as “the slush pile,” which is a heap of sealed envelopes averaging twenty thousand pieces of unsolicited mail

publishers receive each year, filled with the manuscripts of aspiring authors eager to get published.

One day, by a miracle of what I call “the glittery hand of God,” a manuscript appeared entitled *A Freak Like Me*, written by a single mother from Pittsburgh whose name is Sharon G. Flake. Sharon had never been published, but dared to send her novel, which was in a very rough form, over the transom. The narrative voice of the main character, thirteen-year-old Maleeka Madison, struck me immediately. Maleeka is a child burdened with the low self-esteem some black girls face when they're darker skinned. So there it was, a modern-day version of Zora's “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.”

Sharon G. Flake's *A Freak Like Me*, which, before publication, we retitled *The Skin I'm In*, launched the Jump at the Sun list. Sharon's debut novel went on to win the Coretta Scott King John Steptoe Award for new talent. Sharon was named a *Publishers Weekly* “Flying Start.” Her book has sold nearly a million copies across many formats, worldwide, has been translated into several languages, and has received inquiries about being optioned for film.

This is a keen reminder that books with black characters are for every reader. I am so thankful to Lisa Holton for allowing me to jump at the sun, and I am grateful to *Essence* editor in chief, Susan L. Taylor, for her memo, “Andrea, remember your charge.”

* * * *

I've had wonderful mentors and guides throughout my work. One advised that I must always take the role of a pigeon. A pigeon is a creature that carries the message. For more than a decade, as I was working on my inner pigeon, I was haunted by an idea that would not leave me alone. *How could the story of lynching be told to young people?* It's a horrific topic. It would have to be handled with the utmost care and would require a skilled craftsman. Also, because lynching is a subject that no book for young people would dare approach, the format and execution of such a book would have to be just that—daring, different, out of the box.

I didn't know what the book would be or how the topic could be approached. I only knew that I had an urgent need to present this information to young readers. Having grown up in Connecticut for many years, I was quite familiar with the work of Marilyn Nelson, who was the poet laureate of the state of Connecticut. And one day it struck me—Marilyn Nelson. *She* was the one. In fact, once I was convinced of this, I became obsessed with the notion that Marilyn Nelson was the *only* one who could do justice to this idea. I called Marilyn's agent, Regina Brooks, and asked if she and Marilyn could meet with me in my office at Houghton Mifflin, where I was serving as the children's publisher at that time. I didn't tell Regina why I wanted to meet with them, just that I had a book idea I wanted to discuss in person.

It was the day before Thanksgiving, November 2004. The office was empty. Everyone had left to travel for the holiday.

When Marilyn and Regina came, I quietly, almost whispering, explained that I wanted to publish a book about the subject of lynching for young people. My armpits were sweating when I said it. I realized I had never uttered the idea out loud. And, when I finally did, Marilyn reared back, startled. It was as if I'd thrown a bucket of ice water in her face. When she regained her composure, the three of us sat silently for a moment, thinking about the impact of a book such as this. Then, Marilyn said softly, "I can't. It's too sad a topic."

Though I understood Marilyn's feelings I felt completely dashed. In my mind, this book would not see the light of day if Marilyn Nelson didn't agree to write it.

So we three ladies said our goodbyes, and I went into Thanksgiving feeling forlorn. But, as they say, don't give up five minutes before a miracle happens. Soon after I returned to work, there was email from Marilyn Nelson with a manuscript attached.

Its title was *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, a heroic crown of sonnets that plunges readers into the horror of the 1955 lynching of a fourteen-year-old child on his summer vacation visiting family in Mississippi. At the same time, the book draws parallels to many of today's tragedies, among them terrorism, racism, and injustice. Yet, through the metaphor of a wreath of flowers, rings a hope-bell.

When I received Marilyn's manuscript, I read the sonnets again and again, and I wept. It was perfectly rendered, and it was like nothing I'd ever seen before in a traditional book for young readers. Punctuated by the metaphorical paintings of French fine artist, Philippe Lardy, and published in a distinctive and unusual square format, *A Wreath for Emmett Till* became "the little book that could."

It went on to win a Michael L. Printz Honor Award and a Coretta Scott King Honor medal.

But the real "prizes" were, and are, the letters Marilyn and I receive from middle schoolers and high schoolers, and their teachers and their parents about the book's emotional resonance and its use as a powerful discussion-starter in classrooms. And perhaps most importantly, the book's impact on kids who are reluctant readers but have found a way in through *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. These letters are still coming years later which speaks to the staying power of Marilyn Nelson's poem.

I noticed an uptick in *A Wreath for Emmett Till* fan mail last year, immediately following the case of Trayvon Martin, the teenage boy shot tragically by a security guard. Ironically, young Trayvon's life ended in Sanford, Florida, just fifteen miles from Zora Neale Hurston's hometown of Eatonville, Florida, a tourist stop, celebrated for its African American cultural heritage.

In coming to terms with Trayvon's death, the letters from teenagers about *A Wreath for Emmett Till* speak to the healing

capacity of Marilyn Nelson's poem as it offers a way for kids to scream their frustrations and fears.

Like the meeting up of May Hill Arbuthnot and Zora Neale Hurston, I can't help but wonder: *What if Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin met up today?* Obviously, having been born fifty-four years apart, the two boys could not have been contemporaries, but they were around the same age when their lives ended. If things had turned out differently, I like to believe that Emmett and Trayvon would have somehow been brother-chums, perhaps walking to class together on the campus of Columbia University or one of the historically black colleges or universities. Maybe Morehouse College, an all-male institution that cites its success in preparing young, black, gifted men to change the world.

Yes, I like the thought of that. Trayvon Martin and Emmett Till at Morehouse College. Together, on a path to higher learning and change. And, as college students do on casual days, they'd be dressed comfortably for hours of reading in the library.

Yes, I like the thought of that.

Trayvon and Emmett.

A hoodie. And a hat.

Smart kids. Dressed for their success as they "keep it real" and comfortable for a day of studying for finals.

Again, I ask: *What does one wear to deliver the May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture?*

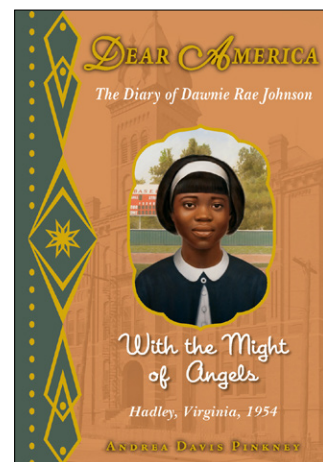
After all, perceptions are important. For better, or for worse. For hoodie or for hat. How many of us judge a book or a kid by its cover?

* * * *

Alongside the desire to publish books that present stories not often told, there are many topics that, as an author, I'm eager to write about as well.

One day, my alarm clock went off and I heard a civil rights song in my thoughts: *Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom!* And I remembered my first day of first grade. And integrating my classroom. And my father escorting me to meet my new teacher.

In conjuring this memory, I immediately wondered if school integration might make a good topic for Scholastic's Dear America series.



Thanks to Scholastic Executive Editor Lisa Sandell, I was given the gift of turning that idea into *With the Might of Angels: The Diary of Dawnie Rae Johnson*.

One of my great joys is riding up the escalator at 557 Broadway, the Scholastic headquarters, each morning where I now work as an editor.

I began my career at Scholastic in 1991 as an editor in the magazine group. Today I've been granted the privilege of helping fellow authors bring *their* ideas to fruition. As a book editor, it's my job to hold the flashlight while my authors do the digging.

I have a thousand reasons why I love coming to work each day. I get to be among smart, happy people. But also, there is no other company in the world that I know of where the mission of diversity appears on the carpeting. If you don't believe me, please come visit. You will see that at Scholastic our primary purpose is to offer all children books they love to read. This has been true for more than ninety years. Scholastic has a clear mission statement, part of which says, "We believe in the respect for the diverse groups in our multicultural society."

I'm often asked to speak in underserved communities. And I'm sometimes warned by the organizers that: (1) Not a lot of people will come; (2) This part of town doesn't really read; and (3) We don't really see a lot of *them* in the library.

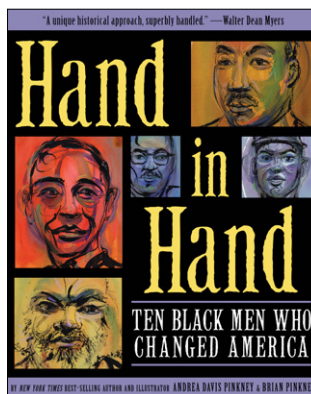
I've heard these caveats so many times. I call it the "we'd just like to warn you" speech. But this never bothers me because I've learned that books and stories bring people out of their houses. When I arrive at the event, I see people who have indeed come out of their homes because of the power of stories.

They come with strollers. And curlers. And wheelchairs. And walkers. And faces and ears and eyes wide open. They're versions of my Uncle Howard. My Aunt Theodora. My cousin Larry.

And there is always the nine-year-old with the notebook. Quiet, afraid to look up. Being seen and not heard. And taking it all in.

Once, at a gathering of this nature, a gentleman presented himself to me at the end of the evening. He let me know quietly that he didn't have the money they were charging to attend the event. He mentioned that he'd recently come out of jail and told me he was working to turn his life around. He confided that he'd grappled earlier that night with a hard decision. As a newly released incarcerated man, he didn't want to break the law, of course. But he couldn't afford to come to the literacy event.

With a mix of shame and longing, he whispered that he'd snuck into the event without purchasing a ticket, but that a book that I'd authored, *Hand In Hand: Ten Black Men Who Changed America*, was one of the books that had drawn him to the evening.



I asked if he had a copy of *Hand In Hand*, and he told me no, that someone had shared the book with him, but that he didn't own one. Also, he couldn't afford to purchase a copy of the book at the sales table of the event, but could I tell him a story from the book.

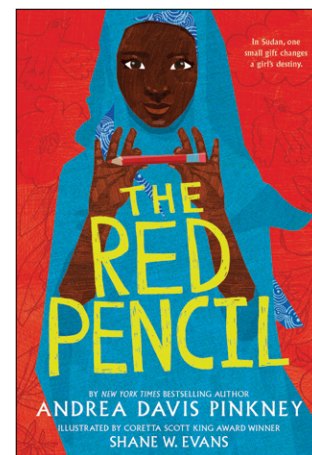
Could I tell him a story? When I reflect on this now, I cannot help but think of May Hill

Arbuthnot's insightful pedagogy. In addition to reading, May had a keen understanding that stories, when spoken, bring readers and books together. I turned the man's request to me back onto him, and I asked *him* to tell *me* a story about himself. And he did. He told me that he wanted to write and illustrate children's books. And with great pride he showed me his graphic novel in progress.

Educators who teach the Montessori method talk about something called "the prepared environment." Let us ask ourselves how we prepare readers to experience books. I believe that in this age of social media we must still, and always, turn to books. Whether delivered on an e-reader or on good old-fashioned printed pages, books have wide arms. They embrace whoever turns to them. That is why, as an author I am now turning my attention to the wide-open arms of global literacy. It is now my hope to connect books and hearts across continents by reaching to Mother Africa, and to her beauty and her plights.

Thus comes the inspiration for my new book entitled *The Red Pencil*, a novel written in verse with illustrations by Shane Evans.

The Red Pencil is set in 2004 in Sudan at the beginning of the Darfur genocide. The story focuses on twelve-year-old Amira's deep desire to learn to read against the wishes of her traditional farming family. Then comes war, gunfire, ravage, and change.



In conducting research for *The Red Pencil*, I learned some startling statistics. According to the LitWorld, a global literacy advocacy organization, there are approximately 523 million girls and women worldwide who cannot read or write.³ This is especially true in developing nations. In Sudan, the illiteracy rate among girls is alarmingly high.

The Red Pencil's illustrated vignette poems follow one girl's journey through dreams, grief, and possibility as she works to transcend the wounds of war. Amira's narrative is based on my time spent with Sudanese refugees and men and women relief workers who served in displacement camps. Additionally, the book's central themes are drawn from my travels in Africa, and also inspired from visiting schools there. In *The Red Pencil*, one small gift changes a girl's destiny.

Here is a short excerpt:

When I draw, it's not me doing it.

It's my hand.
And my twig.
And my *sparrow*.

My hand
and my twig
and my *sparrow*
make the lines.

My hand
and my twig
and my *sparrow*
do the dance
on the sand.

I never know
what my hand
and my twig
and my *sparrow*
will create.

My hand
holds my twig.

But my twig goes
on its own.

My *sparrow*—that's what's inside me: *flight*.⁴

This is also a novel about the power of family. In creating its chapters, in reaching to Africa's struggles and beauty, I once again realized that The Fine Black Line connects us all. The Fine Black Line affirms that you are all my family.

You are the legacy.

We are the rescue squad for knowledge poverty.

We are The Fine Black Line—stretching on. And out. And up.
And through.

From slavery to Selma to Stonewall to Sudan. Stories see us from yesterday to today to tomorrow. Let us celebrate through stories. And storytelling. And story sharing. And story-hearing.

As May Hill Arbuthnot and Zora Neale Hurston might express—*hug, kiss. Cheek. Cheek. Sweet reading.*

For all of us who share in this celebration. Let us now rejoice the legacy of writers who have danced and played and sang their words, and affirmed their *right to write* along The Fine Black Literary Line.

Let us rejoice in the lineage, the love of reading that flows through our souls.

We are all May Hill Arbuthnot.

We are all Zora. And Langston. And Virginia. And Paul.

We are all tall.

We can all jump at the sun!

We can all rejoice the legacy!

Thank you. 🌸

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