

Couples Who Collaborate

Andrea Davis Pinkney and Brian Pinkney

JENNIFER GIBSON

For author Andrea Davis Pinkney and her husband, author/illustrator Brian Pinkney, creating books for children is truly a family affair. The couple has collaborated on more than fifty titles, ranging from board books like *Watch Me Dance* (Red Wagon Books, 1997), to their many picture-book collaborations, like *Sojourner Truth's Step-Stomp Stride* (Hyperion, 2009) and *Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down* (Little, Brown, 2010), to longer nonfiction titles such as *Hand in Hand: Ten Black Men Who Changed America* (Disney-Hyperion, 2012).

We talked with the couple about their secret to balancing work and family life (Saturday meetings at the diner!), what inspired them at a recent school visit, the progress towards diversity in children's book publishing for our nation's youth, and their many book collaborations. The interview includes a discussion of *Martin Rising: Requiem for a King* (Scholastic, 2018), released on the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., uniquely told through an inviting series of what Andrea calls "docu-poems" and illustrated in a luminescent layering of inks, gouaches, and watercolors by Brian.

Unlike many author/illustrator duos, who are kept apart by the publisher and do not typically collaborate or provide feedback, being married and working on many books together presents a unique situation. To what extent do you collaborate together on projects vs. following the traditional model of illustrator and author working separately?

Andrea: Working with the one you love can definitely have its challenges! But it's the love Brian and I have for each other that makes it all so much fun. Brian's studio is in an entirely different neighborhood from our home in Brooklyn. It's his sacred place for making art. I've only been there twice—once



when he was moving in, and another time when he was dropping off art supplies. Even then, I didn't actually go inside. I stayed in the car.

Even though we share everything else—toothpaste, cereal, kids, laundry—we don't share our workspaces. An artist needs to be free to think creatively without a writer's input. Same for us authors. We need to be free to brainstorm and edit without an artist telling us how they think our stories should be written.

Brian: Andrea and I have a really good system of working together. We meet every Saturday for our "Meeting of Two," as we call it. And it is just that—a very structured meeting. To observers, this way of working seems formal, but it works really great. We get together at our favorite diner in Brooklyn. We meet from 12:30 in the afternoon until about 3:00. Each week we slide into the same booth with stacks of stuff we want to discuss. We each bring what we've been working on during the preceding week. I've read Andrea's manuscripts in progress and have made notes in the margins. Andrea's looked at my sketches and has put Post-it notes all over the pages. She brings that to the meeting. And we spend those precious three hours talking it all through.



Freelance illustrator **Jennifer Gibson** is the Information and Archives Specialist at Keuka College in Keuka Park, New York.

Andrea: And there are certain rules for the meeting. Rule number one—no crosstalk allowed. That means we each take turns speaking, like in school. You can't cut the other person off while they're talking. First Brian has a turn, then I have a turn. Rule number two—we always start each comment on a very positive note. For example, when commenting on my writing, Brian must always start by saying, "Honey, you're off to a great start!" I know, it sounds silly, but we all like to be buttered up!

Brian: (Giggles) Yes, it's true. Everybody needs a little boost when getting their work critiqued. Andrea is a really strong art director. She has a very keen eye when looking at my sketches. So one of my rules is that, in the spirit of buttering up your hubby, Andrea's not allowed to say something like, "This guy's foot looks like a football." Instead she's gotta say, "Honey, that area of the sketch looks unresolved." That's marital code-speak for "Honey, you need to redraw this illustration."

Andrea: We also use our meeting time to review anything work related. This includes our appearance calendars, upcoming projects, new book ideas, contracts, anything that has to do with the business of making books. And when the three hours is up, the meeting is *over*. Period. End of story. Another rule—no talking about work outside of the parameters of the Saturday meeting. For example, we can't be brushing our teeth later that evening and start yammering on about something having to do with work. There's a good reason for this.

We've known each other for more than thirty years, and we love to collaborate. But there's a risk in that. You end up talking about work twenty-four seven because we're so passionate about it. That's why the Saturday meetings are so important. They create a boundary. They help us maintain a sane work-family balance. In my purse, I keep a notebook with my "B.P. Saturday List." These are notes to myself about things I want to mention to Brian in our meetings.

Brian: Yes, that's quite a list sometimes! But I love how organized my wife can be. We often joke that to stay happily married, we need to embrace the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. That is, to practice peace and nonviolence.

Growing up, who influenced you the most to pursue creative careers?

Brian: Definitely my dad. He's illustrated more than one hundred books. He's won five Caldecott Honors, and the Caldecott Medal for *The Lion and the Mouse*. But it's not the prizes that inspire me—it's who my dad is inside and how he looks at the world through such a creative lens. When I was growing up, I wanted to be just like him. He's shown me, through his example, that you can be a father and an artist. And you can love both of those jobs. My mother, Gloria Jean, got me my first artist's studio when I was ten years old. It was

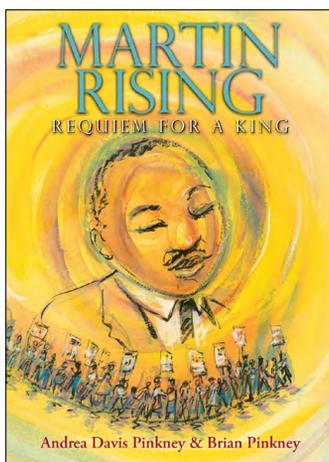
a walk-in closet that she'd converted to foster my little kid creativity. Now that I have kids of my own, I see how important it is to nurture their passions.

Andrea: I grew up in a family of book-loving, storytelling people. My mom was a middle school English teacher. She read constantly. Books were like food, air, water, and sunshine to her, and she was always pushing books on me. When I was a kid, I read what Mom read, which was adult fiction—books by Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison. This had a big influence on me.

Dad was a remarkable storyteller. Whenever we gathered at the Davis dinner table, we told stories. They were always about the odd, happy, memorable things that happened that day. Finding a parking space. Standing in line at the supermarket. Having a chance meeting with a friend. When sharing about his day, Dad was very good at creating a narrative that had a beginning, a middle, and an end. He crafted characters (the lady at the cash register, the bank teller), and we often came away laughing. That's how storytelling started for me.

Does being part of such an iconic children's literature family add to the pressure or a sense of responsibility?

Both: We feel very blessed to have the family that we have. It's something that we don't take for granted. It's a gift, and we're just very happy about it. We love, as a family, to talk about the books that we're creating.



Brian: My dad, Jerry, illustrates beautiful depictions of African-American life and history through watercolors, as do I, but we approach them in very different ways. My mom, Gloria Jean, is an author. My brother, Myles Pinkney, is a photographer and children's book creator along with his wife, Sandra Pinkney, who writes traditional, nonfiction children's books. So it's all in the family, and we all do something very different. So it's all just a big party. When we have Thanksgiving dinner or Fourth of July outings, we're all just sharing the books that we are creating and ideas and what we're thinking about and what we're working on.

Andrea: I call Brian's mom and dad my "mother-in-love" and my "father-in-love." I consider them my other set of parents, along with my own parents. I also call Jerry "Daddy Lion," paying homage to *The Lion and the Mouse*; it's a fun, creative family to be in.

Andrea, from digging deep into research, to penning what you call "book magic," could you share a bit of how you approach a nonfiction writing project?

Andrea: "Book magic" is the moment when a reader has fallen so deeply into a book that the world goes by—and nothing else

matters but those words and the pictures. They've been swept away by the sheer magic of it all.

As an author, my hope is to invite the reader to an experience. This is especially important when I am creating a nonfiction book. I approach it by thinking, *How can I reach out a hand to the reader? Am I creating a narrative that is going to pull them in, take them on a journey?*

An example being our new book, *Martin Rising*, which is written as a series of “docu-poems” detailing the final days of Dr. Martin Luther King’s life before his assassination. But it’s not so much the informational, historical aspects, it’s really the poetic form that will invite readers into the experience of this nonfiction book.

Tell us about your collaboration for *Hand in Hand: Ten Black Men Who Changed America*, filled with deeply personal stories of black men featured in American history books. We understand it was created at the initial request of your son reacting to media portrayals, who requested, “Mom, write a book about the goodness of black men. Give me nonfiction that’s the real deal—and fun for me to read!” After that request, what came next?

Andrea: I ask students, “How many of you like nonfiction?” A small amount of hands go up. I then ask, “Why don’t you like it?” They say, “It’s boring. I have to read it for school. Nonfiction is like yucky spinach.” Those are the kinds of answers I get. And so, I’ve made it my mission to solve the yucky spinach problem.

I also have a lot of kids telling me, “Mrs. Pinkney, I have to do a book report on an African-American hero for school. I need to go get a book on Jackie Robinson or Thurgood Marshall or Barack Obama.” As the mother of an African-American son, it’s always been important to me to provide him, and others like him, with books that depict black men in positive and engaging ways.

Brian: Yes, as a black man and a father, and as the son of an African-American father, it’s very important to me to beautifully render the men that appear in my books. To depict them in regal ways. The *Hand in Hand* portraits were inspired by African masks. If you really look closely, they’re somewhat metaphorical. Really, it’s about the spiritual essence of each of those men. You can see the influences.

Brian, you have illustrated in many mediums, from watercolor and gouache to oils and scratchboard, yet all of your paintings possess your unique style. How do you create illustrations and how has your style evolved?

Brian: When I create illustrations based on Andrea’s writing, and by other authors, I’m really inspired by the storytelling and the rhythm of it. So that when I’m illustrating someone like Ella Fitzgerald, I’ll render her in scratchboard, which is a very sculptural, three-dimensional, labor-intensive art form.

It involves a specialized kind of scratchboard called Este, that comes from England. Then I use a scratchboard nib, which is like a sharp tool, and the way it’s formulated with a coating of black ink, you can slice into it like butter. When I am scratch- ing, it sounds like drumming, *tch, tch*, there is a musicality to it, and that sounds appropriate for a book about Duke Ellington or Ella Fitzgerald.

In the case of *Martin Rising*, that is watercolors, India ink, and gouache. That cover has a very luminescent quality to it. You’ll notice that the book has a lot of yellows and golds, because it’s really about the transcendence of darkness and Martin’s ability to inspire the people who believed in him, on the cover of the book. It is as if Martin is gazing back at the marchers, they’re kind of looking up at him, and they’re inspiring each other—he’s inspiring them with his gaze, they’re inspiring him through their unity. And that was a case too where there wasn’t just the palette or just the medium, it was the way I approached those paintings. I was inspired by painters like Marc Chagall, a Civil Rights painter named Norman Lewis, and in the case of *Martin Rising*, those paintings are not necessarily meant to illustrate the text, they are meant to convey the kind of metaphorical, emotional, symbolic, spiritual aspects of Martin in his final days and then his ultimate transcendence.

So it really depends on the book, the story, and the medium. I read a manuscript many times, then I sit quietly. I meditate and become inspired to act.

Andrea, in *Martin Rising: Requiem for a King*, tell us about how you selected moments of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s life to write poems to.

Andrea: The year 2018 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. It seems quite fitting to be writing about it now, because Martin’s dream for peace, equality, unity, and brotherhood is needed more than ever. In the book, there are three sections: there’s daylight, which chronicles the beginning of Martin’s life, we start on his birth- day in 1929; then part two is darkness, when we are coming to 1968 and the events leading up to his assassination; and part three is dawn, the transcendence of a new day, Martin is rising, and his message is rising and continues to rise and permeate with this generation now. It comes full circle with Martin Luther King Day, which can be any year, on January fifteenth.

That’s how I chose those pivotal events that happened, and you’ll see that the book is written chronologically, each of the “docu-poems” is dated so that we know when Martin arrived in Memphis, when he gave his final “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, and when he was assassinated. There are aspects of Martin’s humanity which I felt were important to include. There were moments when he felt doubtful. He didn’t know if his dream was ever going to become a reality. But he still moved past his doubt. He transcended his own humanity, his own limitations. He moved forward. So much of what Martin believed in is so pertinent today.

Brian, you've also written and illustrated six books; what is your process when the entire book project is your own vision?

Brian: Being an author and an illustrator for the same book is very different because it's a wholly-aligned vision. Most of the books I've written and illustrated are picture-books, and they're for that younger reader. My first book, called *Max Found Two Sticks*, is about a boy who spends his day in his Brooklyn neighborhood, which is where I live, not wanting to say much and using a set of twigs that fall from a tree as his drumsticks, and that's me as a kid. In the book there's a church that's actually in my neighborhood. I was a drummer as a kid, and I'm still a drummer now.

The books that I write usually come from my own childhood experiences. I have a more recent book called *On the Ball*, about a kid playing soccer with different animals, and I was a soccer player growing up. I have a new book coming out called *Puppy Truck*, and it's about a little kid named Carter who really wants a puppy but he gets a toy truck instead. I really wanted a dog as a kid and my parents wouldn't get me one, but I did get a toy truck. So again, a lot of my books are based on my childhood experiences.

Andrea, how did working in publishing inform your writing practice?

Andrea: I'm a book editor as well as an author. I understand authors because I am one. I know what it's like to have writer's block and what it's like to feel great about something you've written. But I also know the struggle of needing more time to finish a manuscript. As an editor, I'm there to hold the flashlight while the author does the digging. My role is to guide the creative process. When I am working nine-to-five as an editor, that's what I'm doing. I'm not in "writer brain." In my early mornings, I get up at four o'clock. That's when I do my writing. As I'm a writer, I can't edit myself. So I am very fortunate to have amazing editors who see what I can't see. Trying to edit your own work is like trying to do dental work on yourself. It's impossible! You need somebody else to help you get in there and see what needs to be fixed. I have tremendous respect for the process.

Having broken down boundaries in publishing, and through writing about black men and women who have broken down barriers, has your perspective changed on what children's books have to offer our diverse young people in 2018?

Andrea: As a team, we're in schools constantly. And if you go into most classrooms in the United States, those classrooms, no matter where we are, have a diverse mix of students. All races, ethnicities, backgrounds, religions, orientations, and we're in a moment now where we have a ripe opportunity to create books for the vast range of children that come from so many different experiences. So it's a hopeful time, but we cannot afford the luxury of cooling off. Now more than ever we really need to keep our eyes on that prize, and we need to not only create books for diverse audiences but create a diversity of titles, across genres, across subject matters, and that's what we've devoted our life's work to doing, and we believe in it strongly.

Anyone who follows your activities on social media can attest that your schedule of events, whether giving back to the community or accepting awards, is not for the faint of heart! Tell us about some recent highlights.

Andrea: We travel quite a bit. We recently had the opportunity to visit a school in Denver. Before we were going to speak to all the students, we were invited to go into a classroom of fourth-graders. The kids received a book donation box of assorted titles, and we sat with students one-on-one and read with them. What was so amazing was that, for these kids, it was as exciting, and as fun, as Christmas morning. They dove into the box, they selected books, and they eyed which books to read. And just seeing how engaged they were, with the love and the joy and the power of reading, we just floated out of there, we were so happy to see that again. In the age of social media, the age of technology, these kids were there, holding books, loving them, and reading them.

Another recent highlight is that we love to read with our own children, who are grown, but having them talk to us about what they're reading and having our daughter and our son recommend books to us that we're all enjoying and talking about, that's a pleasure. 🐾

CSK Award Celebrates 50th Anniversary



2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the Coretta Scott King Book Awards. Andrea Davis Pinkney will serve as honorary chair of the CSK anniversary planning committee, along

with chair Dr. Claudette S. McLinn, executive director of the Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature (CSMCL) in Inglewood, CA.

Using the hashtag, #CSK50 on social media, you can share your favorite moments from past Coretta Scott King Book Awards breakfasts, Coretta Scott King Book Award titles that you and your library cherish, or what this award means to you as a library worker, educator, reader, or writer.

For more information on plans for the celebration at next year's ALA Annual Conference, visit <http://www.ala.org/rt/emiert/cskbookawards/csk50>.