



**Andrea Davis Pinkney**

**Teachingbooks.net Original In-depth  
Author Interview**

**Andrea Davis Pinkney, interviewed in New York City on May 16, 2012.**

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You are the author of award winning books about the African American experience for children. You also edit books for publication that go on to win awards and find a place in readers' hearts and in school curriculum. Please talk a little bit about your childhood; what were you like as a child?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** I grew up right outside Washington D.C. in a town called Gaithersburg, Maryland. That's where I went to elementary school.

When I was in the second grade, I started carrying a notebook with me wherever I went. I still do that today. I had that notebook with me all the time: by my side, in my book bag, in my pillowcase, you name it. I wrote about everything that was important to me —my cat, Mikki; my dog, Casey; my Barbie dolls; my sister, Lynne; my brother, P. J., and my mom and dad.

I don't know how I got the idea or the habit to carry this notebook, but somewhere along the line, I did. I had no idea then that I would be still carrying a notebook with me as a grown-up. But I do.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How did friends respond to a small girl carrying a notebook all the time?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** People were curious. They would ask, "What *is* that thing, and what are you writing in there?" Sometimes I would share it, and sometimes I wouldn't. People were intrigued about what that notebook was. They wanted to know if I was doing schoolwork. Or, they wondered if the notebook was a journal or some kind of secret diary.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** At what age did you begin writing in your notebook?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** I started at age seven. I remember very specifically being seven years old and writing about my family.

I save all my notebooks. It's fun to go back and read about things that were important to me and to realize that some of them are still important to me now, like my brother and sister and parents.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What age were you when your family moved to Connecticut?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** When I was in the seventh grade, my family moved to Wilton, Connecticut. Going into middle school was hard, but what was harder was moving to a town where there were virtually no African American families. I remember that change very specifically.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What stuck with you from that time period?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** I remember my first day of seventh grade. I looked around, and I didn't see any folks like me — no one. I had the feeling of what I've later in my life come to call "anxious apartness." I remember thinking, *This is different. It's not what I'm used to. It's a little strange, but okay.* On that day I shrugged heavily, not knowing what to expect.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your parents were active in the Civil Rights movement.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** Yes. When Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C., my mom was expecting me. I was born a month after the landmark speech was made, just a few blocks from where the speech took place. I always think that somehow, some way, I heard Martin telling of his dream from inside my mom's belly. My parents were very politically active, very out there. My dad was one of the first African American interns in the House of Representatives on Capitol Hill. So — civil rights activism is very much a part of me.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What did your father do for a living? Was he in politics?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** My dad was employed by the U.S. Department of Labor. He worked directly alongside several presidents advising Congress on fair labor practices for African Americans, women, and minorities. As a child, I remember notable politicians, civil rights leaders, and government officials calling my dad at home, seeking counsel. Also, Dad was an avid reader of history and nonfiction. This definitely had an impact on me, and has informed the nonfiction books I write today.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your mom was a teacher.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** Oh, yes, Mom was quite a teacher! She taught middle school English, and was a real stickler for grammar, language, good writing, and proper diction. Also, Mom was — and still is — a voracious reader of all kinds of literature, especially the classics. She was constantly thrusting books upon me! Somewhere along the line, it occurred to me that a living, breathing person was writing those books, and that maybe I could do that.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You grew up in an amazing time and place. There's such a dramatic connection between growing up with the civil rights movement all around you and what you're doing now.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** So much of what I do centers around social justice. A great example is the book *Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood up by Sitting Down*, which takes place on February 1, 1960, when four college students went into a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, and staged a nonviolent protest.

I was in Washington D.C. at the National Book Festival when the idea came to me to present this story to young readers. Right then and there, I started writing the book!

I was in the city of my birth, where Martin Luther King, Jr. had delivered his landmark speech, and President Obama would soon be elected into office. There I was, in the heart of it all, crafting this story about the Greensboro, North Carolina sit-ins, civil rights, and nonviolent protest.

I have always consulted with Mom and Dad, asking, "Is this correct? What happened back then?" My folks, who lived these experiences, would always help me breathe heart and soul into my narratives.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your books are somewhat journalistic. Is that intentional?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** I'm a graduate of Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications, where I majored in print journalism. My very first discipline was writing for newspapers. When you write for newspapers, you have to write very economically, get your facts down accurately, and meet deadlines.

My journalistic training has really helped me in my work as an author. I've become adept at sourcing out facts, making every word count in a story, and bringing it in on time. Also, when you write for newspapers or magazines, it's important to engage readers immediately with an intriguing headline and opening paragraph. These skills have helped me as a children's book author. Kids want to be taken in right away when they read a book. So — I'm always going for that.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What inspired you to pursue work as a writer?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** When I was growing up, I had two television shows that inspired me to become a writer. The first was "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." Mary Tyler Moore was a broadcast journalist. She lived in Minneapolis. This was the early 1970s. I didn't know any career women who lived in a big city and had their own apartment, but I craved that, even as a kid. I was *glued* to that TV show.

If I could have ripped off the front of the television and stepped onto the set of WJM, the news station where Mary Tyler Moore worked, I would have done it. I wanted to be a career woman, living in a big city, with my own apartment — just like Mary! "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" encouraged me to go to journalism school.

The other television show that inspired me was called "The Waltons." It was about a farm family during the Great Depression who lived on a place called Walton's Mountain. The oldest Walton child, John-Boy, was an aspiring novelist, and he would write his

memories and musings about life with his family at the beginning and end of each show. I loved this! It was always so moving.

Mary Tyler Moore and John-Boy Walton were my great inspiration. I thought, *What John-Boy Walton does is what I want to do — write about what's important to me.*

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Those two very white television shows inspired you, an African American girl, and you have turned that inspiration into a career telling African American stories.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** Absolutely. I write the books that I do because there are many African American stories that I want to tell and that I hope are as intriguing to young readers as they are to me.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Many people have, “There weren’t books about me, an African American, as a child”? Is that something that you felt?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** Sadly, yes. When I was growing up, I read so many books, and there were so few that depicted my experience. One of the first books that spoke to me—it was the first novel I read from cover to cover—was a book entitled *The Contender* by Robert Lipsyte, a sports writer. My eighth grade English teacher, Mr. Dwyer, gave me that book. There was something about it that just really struck me about Alfred Brooks, the main character.

Years later, I was at a writing conference and I met Robert Lipsyte! I went up and spoke to him, and he was so gracious. I told him *The Contender* was the first novel I read from beginning to end. I couldn't believe I was meeting *the* Robert Lipsyte who had written *The Contender*.

Interestingly enough, *The Contender* served as part of the inspiration for my novel entitled, *Bird in a Box*, about three kids whose lives come together in an unexpected friendship on June 22, 1937, the night famed boxer Joe Louis becomes the heavyweight champion of the world.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please talk more about *Bird in a Box*.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** *Bird in a Box* is set during the Great Depression. It's the story of Hibernia, Otis, and Willie who are each reaching for a dream. Hibernia longs to sing at Harlem's Savoy Ballroom; Otis clings to his Philco radio, listening night after night to comedy shows and sports commentary; Willie, a kid-boxer, wants to be just like Joe Louis. It's a story of triumph in the face of tragedy, and is based on the life and times of my great grandfather, an amateur kid-boxer whose name was Cyclone Williams. As part of my research, I purchased a pair of vintage Spalding boxing gloves, got myself a trainer, and went into the ring! I *became* a boxer so that I could capture the drama and excitement of Willie's struggle as he fought to become just like his idol, Joe Louis.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What was your first journalism job?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** My first job out of college was as an editorial assistant at *Mechanix Illustrated* magazine, a men’s automotive mechanics magazine. I took the job because, more than anything, I wanted to live in a big city like Mary Tyler Moore, and I wanted to work in publishing. So that’s what I did. After graduating from Syracuse University, I went straight to midtown Manhattan, where the editorial offices of *Mechanix Illustrated* were housed, and I never looked back. I loved working there.

And — there was an unexpected bonus — I met my husband, illustrator Brian Pinkney, who worked in the art department of *Field & Stream* magazine, which was across the hall from *Mechanix Illustrated*.

After *Mechanix Illustrated*, I went on to *Essence* magazine, one of the premier magazines for African American women. I got that job because the magazine needed an editor who had experience writing about cars, and could produce their annual car guide. I was probably the only candidate who went into that interview having hands-on automotive journalism experience!

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How did you end up in children’s books?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** When I was a senior editor at *Essence* magazine, I oversaw the Lifestyle department, which included travel, automotive, parenting, food, and children’s books. That was really an important beginning for me because as a magazine editor it was my job to pull together an annual holiday gift guide that included children’s books and book reviews. We wanted to include a rich mix of African American children’s literature, so I would call publishers and say, “Send me your best African American children’s books — we’ll feature them in the magazine.” That’s when I first saw there was so little available.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What were some of the children’s books featuring African American characters at that time?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** I was seeing great things — books by Virginia Hamilton, the wonderful works of Walter Dean Myers and Mildred Taylor. But I wanted *more*. I was hungry for a black *Babysitters Club*-type series or a *Sweet Valley High* series that featured black girls. I wanted adventure stories for African American boys. Also, there wasn’t a lot for very young readers, toddlers, and emerging readers—kids who were just starting to read.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How did you and Brian Pinkney start collaborating?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** Brian Pinkney was my boyfriend at that time. He was just starting to illustrate picture books. I would nag him constantly: “You should call your editor up at your publishing company and tell them they really should do a book about say, Alvin Ailey!” Or, “Why hasn’t anybody ever done a book about the African American holiday of

Kwanzaa?” And, “I wish there was a big collection of stories about African American freedom fighting women.”

Finally Brian stuck it to me, and said, “Why don’t *you* write those books?” My response was, “No, no, no — I want to be like Mary Tyler Moore. Mary Tyler Moore never wrote a children’s book, and neither did John-Boy Walton.” Then I really started to consider what Brian was saying. And I thought, *Why don’t I give it a try?*

I didn’t know how to write a children’s book. I had never done it. I had read a lot of children’s books, certainly, but writing a book is very different than reading one. Writing for children is the hardest writing there is. I found that out right away as I attempted to do it.

My first book was a picture book biography about the African American choreographer and dancer, Alvin Ailey, and that was the beginning. Brian illustrated that book.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** After *Alvin Ailey* you created the Kwanzaa book that you said you needed.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** Yes. *Seven Candles for Kwanzaa* came shortly after *Alvin Ailey*. As a family who celebrates Kwanzaa every year with a big Kwanzaa party, I just couldn’t believe there were no picture books about this important African American holiday! I felt this was a book African American families — and all families — really needed and could benefit from.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How do you describe the differences between putting together a picture book as opposed to an article on the same topic?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** When you’re writing a picture book, it’s very important to have a strong beginning, middle, and end. While that’s true when you’re writing a magazine article, in the picture book, you also need to be conscious of the fact that it’s going to be illustrated. There’s a lot that does not need to be said because the illustrator will do his or her job to visually show what the text does not. In a magazine or newspaper article, while you do have photographs, those photographs aren’t telling the entire story. It’s a little bit of a different discipline.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Generally speaking, when you’re writing a picture book, you’re just writing the manuscript, and you don’t know what the illustrator is going to do.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** That’s right. When I’m writing a picture book, I don’t know how the illustrator will interpret my words. It’s often a wonderful surprise. My job is to tell the story as completely as I can, and then see what the illustrator brings to it.

I do have a unique situation because I am married to Brian Pinkney, and he’s illustrated many of the books that we’ve collaborated on. But I don’t even see what Brian is doing. His studio is outside of our home. It’s in an entirely different neighborhood, so I can’t even stop by to check on his progress. I don’t ever go to that studio. I don’t ask him

how it's going. I don't see how it's shaping up. I look at the illustrations when they're finished.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What's it like to work with the person to whom you're married?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** What a lot of folks don't realize is that authors and illustrators usually never meet each other. They don't go to a coffee shop together. They don't hang out together. They don't collaborate on the book in person.

Brian and I have a very good way of working together. We meet every Saturday from 10:30 in the morning to 2:30 in the afternoon.

Brian has read my manuscript throughout the week, and I've looked at his sketches. We have not discussed it until that Saturday. We bring those to our dining room table, or we go to our favorite diner for a change of scene. They actually know us in the diner now. We spread out all our papers and talk, talk, talk, as our waiter, Ramone, keeps refilling our water glasses.

There are certain rules for the meeting. There is no crosstalk, which means you can't cut the person off while he or she is speaking. Brian speaks, and then I speak, and we take turns back and forth. We talk about how the manuscript is working with the sketches.

When the meeting is over, it's over, and we don't talk about a book's progress again until the next Saturday. The reason for this is that we're sharing a family and children and a house and a life and all that, and we don't want to be gabbing about work all the time. We put a boundary on it, and it works. We end the meeting on a very positive note, and we leave feeling happy.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please talk a little bit about being a part of the Pinkney family—a family that seems to have had such a tremendous impact on filling the need to publish quality stories about the African American experience.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** I feel very fortunate to be in a family with so many children's book creators, but also a family who loves the work that we do. It's a beautiful thing that we all share. At family gatherings we spend lots of fun time talking about books we've read and books that we're working on. What's also wonderful is that each of us Pinkneys create books that are very different from each other.

We don't use the term "in-law" in our family. Jerry Pinkney, my "father-in-love," is Brian's father. Jerry is the recipient of five Caldecott Honor medals. His *Lion and the Mouse* won the Caldecott medal in 2010. I've recently taken to calling Jerry my "Daddy Lion."

My "mother-in-love," Brian's mother, Gloria Jean Pinkney, is also an author. And, of course, Brian Pinkney, who I am married to, is a children's book author and illustrator with two Caldecott Honor medals to his credit, along with three Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Award citations and the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award medal. It's just a really nice family connection that we have.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your book, *Boycott Blues*, is used a lot in schools.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** Teachers really seem to gravitate to *Boycott Blues*. It's the story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycotts. The fun I had in creating that book was telling it from the point of view of a hound dog playing his blues guitar. Brian and I really wanted to do something very different with this particular aspect of civil rights.

"Jim Crow" is the name used for the segregation laws that were enacted in the South that kept African Americans and white people separate in public places. In *Boycott Blues* we made Jim Crow a character. His bird beak is an annoying pointy presence that peck-peck-pecks on the boycotters as they're walking for more than a year in the fight for equality.

We wanted to give young readers a way to fully understand that moment in history. Jim Crow's pecky annoyance seemed like a good way to make it real for children, and give teachers a way to explain this aspect of the law.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You've created books about some phenomenal African American musicians. Your *Duke Ellington* is a Caldecott Honor and Coretta Scott King Honor book.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** Brian and I have done several picture book biographies, one of which is *Duke Ellington*. *Duke Ellington* is the story of the well-known jazz piano prince. What I love about that book is that we were able to really make it fun. The artwork is infused with swirls of color. What a lot of readers don't know is that Duke Ellington also really wanted to be a painter. I believe that he may have seen colors when he was playing his piano. This is conveyed in Brian's paintings.

Another picture book biography, *Ella Fitzgerald*, is told from the point of view of Scat Cat Monroe. He is Ella's guardian angel, and the narrator of the story. We wanted to invite readers into a musical experience, so when you enter the book, you're also entering a musical fantasy. That's the way I feel when I'm listening to some great jazz. In the book, there are musicians on swings to depict swing music, and an upside down Dizzy Gillespie—who turned jazz on its head!

Despite the fun and fantasy, our books are nonfiction. The facts are all correct; the information is all there. We just wanted to make the reading experience fun for students and teachers.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your book *Let it Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters* won the Coretta Scott King Author Honor Award.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** *Let it Shine* is a collection of stories of ten African American freedom fighting women, ranging from Sojourner Truth to Harriet Tubman up through modern day. The book is comprised of ten separate stories, though the volume tells one important story—a collective story of the power of African American women.

I enjoyed writing *Let it Shine*. During the process of creating that book, I kept saying to myself, "Yeah, we black women did some incredible things."

I'm working now on the companion volume to *Let it Shine*. It's called *Hand in Hand: Ten Black Men Who Changed America*. It's a 250-page compilation of nonfiction narratives about African American freedom fighting men — everyone from Frederick Douglass up through Barack Obama. In my research for *Hand in Hand*, there were things that surprised, delighted, and inspired me. The research was quite extensive. I was able to find some little-known facts and include those.

With so much recent discussion about the Common Core Standards and accessible nonfiction, teachers are telling me that these books serve as important tools for delivering this information to students as part of the curriculum, but also in ways that truly engage kids. I'm so happy to hear this. It's always been my hope to get kids reading — and enjoying — nonfiction. As the mom of a middle school son, I'm always looking for ways to engage him in history and books about notable people that may not appear in his textbooks.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please talk about your dad's storytelling and how that influenced you.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** My dad, the late Philip J. Davis, was an amazing storyteller. It was daily, usually at the dinner table. He could take a very simple event, like finding a parking space, or going to the grocery store, or getting stuck in line at the bank, and craft a story that had a wonderful beginning, a great middle, and usually a funny ending. The stories had characters and dialogue that arose from the people that he met along the journey.

Dad's daily tales showed me the power of a good story. That has really stayed with me. I do it now with my own two children.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Are you still as committed as ever to making sure African American stories are told?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** Absolutely. My primary purpose as an author is to create books that celebrate the African American experience. As an African American mother, this is especially important.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You also work as publisher. You've been involved in bringing to life some of the most important books. Please talk about that role.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** I'm currently an editor at Scholastic. In that capacity, I help other authors say what they want to say in their books. I'm the editor of Christopher Paul Curtis, who wrote a wonderful novel for Scholastic entitled, *Elijah of Buxton*, which won a Newbery Honor medal and the Coretta Scott King Author Award.

At Scholastic, I have the great pleasure and privilege to be the editor of Walter Dean Myers, the author of more than one hundred books, and the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature.

I am continuing to publish books in the African American tradition, but also other types of books as well. I published a book by Allen Say entitled *Drawing from Memory*, which won a Robert F. Sibert Honor.

I edit books by a range of authors and on many topics. It's a great pleasure getting books into the hands of young readers.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** As an editor, how do you select books to publish?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** My main goal is to publish great stories that are authentic, emotionally compelling, and well written. Also, it is really important to me to celebrate our multicultural America. I keep that top-of-mind every single day.

Scholastic is very pleased to publish a novel entitled *The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano* written by Sonia Manzano.

Sonia Manzano has defined the role of "Maria" on the popular children's television series Sesame Street. She has won fifteen Emmy Awards for her writing on television, and America sees her every year in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Now she has turned her talent to writing fiction for young adults. That's a perfect example of trying to celebrate the vast cultural experiences in America. This particular novel takes place in 1969 in *El Barrio*, Spanish Harlem.

I believe that multiculturalism is the mainstream. If you look around in many classrooms, there are lots of faces of color, and that is only going to continue to increase. So I want to give books to those kids and those experiences, and share them with readers who do not come from those cultural backgrounds.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please talk about the creation of Jump at the Sun. It speaks to what you are trying to do.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** When publishing visionary Lisa Holton invited me to launch the Jump at the Sun imprint at Hyperion Books for Children, I *jumped* at the opportunity! Lisa was the publisher at Hyperion at that time. The Jump at the Sun imprint was Lisa's brainchild. We launched a very distinguished, high profile list of titles that celebrated the African American experience, but that also went beyond niche publishing — our goal was to publish a breadth of books across all genres that reached a wide customer base.

It went back to my original vision when I was an editor at *Essence* magazine, which was to give kids all kinds of stories and experiences, everything from board books for toddlers up through novels and series for young adults.

We had a great time at Jump at the Sun! One of our most commercial successes was the The Cheetah Girls books by Deborah Gregory. The books became a series of Disney original movies, starring actress Raven Symone. The Cheetah Girls was born out of wanting to produce a fun, fast-forward, age-appropriate book series for girls, ages 8 to 14 that featured African American and Latina characters. And it worked wonderfully! This was our answer to the Babysitters Club and Sweet Valley High, but with hip "cheetah-licious" girls of color leading the way.

During my Jump at the Sun tenure I was also keenly focused on bringing new talent into the publishing fold. Sharon G. Flake is an author whose career was launched

at the Jump at the Sun imprint, with her seminal book *The Skin I'm In*, a novel that has sold nearly 1 million copies in hardcover, and has been translated into several languages. Sharon has gone on to win many Coretta Scott King Author Honor awards, and has a tremendous body of work. Jump at the Sun gave Sharon Flake a spotlight that she may not have gotten as a debut author at another house.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You've written books in different kinds of formats.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** Indeed. As an author, I'm always pushing my own limits. Though much of my body of work focuses on nonfiction and historical fiction, I work hard to create books that are different from each other. I recently wrote a book in the Scholastic Dear America series entitled *With the Might of Angels: The Diary of Dawnie Rae Johnson*.

The novel features a 12-year-old girl, who in 1954, after the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision—which says that segregation in public schools is unconstitutional—is able to go to the white school in her district.

Because the book is written in a diary format and is told from Dawnie Rae Johnson's point of view, young readers have told me they're able to fully understand the nuances of prejudice and also the political and legal landscape of the times.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please describe a typical work day.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** I'm an early riser. My day begins 4:00 a.m. At that hour I get up, sit quietly for a few minutes, and I settle my thoughts. I try to think of things that bring me joy — time spent on a kayak with my son; traveling with my daughter — and I focus deeply on those things. This gets me ready for my day. When I'm in a good mood, I can do my best work. Then, around 5:00 I start writing, writing, writing.

Writing is a craft and a discipline, and I take it very seriously. I write every single day.

Then, around 5:45, I race out of my house in the dark, and get to the YMCA pool in Brooklyn, where I live so that I can swim laps for about an hour.

I get my best ideas while doing the backstroke. While swimming, I think, *Okay, what do I want to do now, in terms of my writing?* Oftentimes, that's when an idea pops up in my brain. At this particular pool, there are flags hanging from the ceiling. There's something magic in those flags! They often shoot an idea right down into my brain!

After my swim, I rush home and do "Mommy Patrol" — I get my kids' knapsacks zipped up, lunches in lunchboxes, permission slips signed. And out the door my kids go, onto the school bus. I'm very fortunate that I have a tremendous husband who makes my morning ritual possible. Brian wakes up our daughter and son and cooks them a full breakfast — pancakes, eggs, bacon.

With our children on their way to school, I then go to work at Scholastic, where I'm an editor. After my day job, I go home and return to "Mommy Patrol" — helping kids with homework and other extra-curricular stuff like getting them ready for their school sports teams and student council. Brian has cooked dinner. After the kids are settled for the

evening, I do a little more writing for about an hour, maybe 10:30 to 11:30. Then I go to sleep. And then I do it all over again. That's my typical day.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your energy is boundless. I mean, you've even run marathons.

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** (Laughs!) I seem to have a lot of energy. Yes, I've run in the New York Marathon a few times. I'm not a very fast runner, and I take lots of breaks during the race. It's more of a social event for me. I'm in it for the fun of running through the streets with my fellow New Yorkers and chatting it up with people I meet while out on the course.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** As an editor, you've gotten to work with iconic, extraordinary authors, such as Marilyn Nelson, Toni Morrison, Christopher Paul Curtis, Sharon Draper, Walter Dean Myers, Kadir Nelson, and so many more.

Could you please talk about the interrelationship between being both a writer and an editor, and the fact that you've gotten to work with some of these legends?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** I'm very fortunate to have been granted the privilege of wearing two hats in the publishing industry — that of editor and that of author. As an editor, it's my job to hold the flashlight while the author or illustrator is doing the digging. I'm there to guide that process, and to perhaps direct the light in a way that the author may or may not have thought of. But it's not really *me* doing the directing. It's something bigger than myself that's working *through* me.

It's also my job to help an author or illustrator say what they want to say in the best possible way, whether it's in words or pictures.

Because I'm an author myself, I understand how hard writing is. I understand what authors go through, and what that digging process is like to get to the story.

And as an author, I have the great pleasure of having editors help me do that. I have some wonderful editors who are holding that flashlight for me, and directing me toward my best writing.

I love editing *and* writing. I couldn't do one at the exclusion of the other. For me, each of the disciplines comes from a different side of my brain.

Being an editor affords me the opportunity to pursue a book idea that I feel passionate about, but that I may not have the inclination to write myself. That's when I think, *Who would be a great writer for this idea?* and I pick up the phone and call that person.

The perfect example is Marilyn Nelson, who wrote a book that I published called *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. I had wanted to address the subject of lynching in a book for young people for more than a decade, and I knew I was not the right author for that book. But I kept thinking *Who could it be?*

I heard Marilyn give a speech one day, and my light bulb went on. I was immediately struck — *She's the one!* What Marilyn produced in that book is something that I never could have imagined.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you do when you get stuck as a writer?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** Writer's block is an interesting thing. For me, because I'm trained as a journalist, I don't really get writer's block. When I was at Syracuse University studying newspaper journalism, the professor would have a stopwatch. He would give us a topic, hit that stopwatch, and say, "Go!" We would have to produce something by the time that watch stopped.

So I'm very trained in just getting started. Of course, I'm not always creating perfect prose when I'm working on a stopwatch. But the beauty of the way I was trained as a writer is that I'm accustomed to getting started and meeting a deadline. Once I have something on paper, I go back in and really work on crafting the writing.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you like to tell students?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** I visit a lot of schools. I have been in schools all over the United States of America and in several nations outside the U.S. I love meeting students. Being around young people reminds me that we each have our own stories to tell. That's what I say to students — I tell them that their individual stories makes each of them special.

I tell kids, even if you're writing a work of fiction that is not necessarily about you, bring your experiences to it. If you've been happy in your life, if you've been sad in your life, if you've had something that you've struggled through and overcome, put that into your writing assignments. There's no other you, and that's a beautiful thing.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What else do you want to share?

**ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY:** To teachers and librarians, I want to say, you are the lucky ones. You are on the front lines every day with students. Really look at them. *See* them. *Hear* them. *Listen*. Of course you know that you are important and influential in the lives of kids. Every word you say, every glance, intonation or inference has the power to bolster a student. The same is true with the books you offer them — these are the mirrors and windows through which young readers find themselves and influence others.

This In-depth Written Interview is created by TeachingBooks.net for educational purposes and may be copied and distributed solely for these purposes for no charge as long as the copyright information remains on all copies.

Questions regarding this program should be directed to [info@teachingbooks.net](mailto:info@teachingbooks.net).

Copyright ©2012 TeachingBooks.net LLC. All rights reserved.



© 2012 TeachingBooks.net LLC. All rights reserved.