



Jerry Pinkney

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

Jerry Pinkney, interviewed in his home in Croton On Hudson, New York on September 15, 2010.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have earned the Caldecott Medal, five Caldecott Honor Medals, five Coretta Scott King Awards, and four Coretta Scott King Honor Awards, among many other awards and accolades for individual projects and your body of work. What kind of encouragement did you have for your creative pursuits as a child?

JERRY PINKNEY: I drew from as far back as I can remember and both my parents supported me each in their own ways. I think that was very healthy for me and very important. In a way, drawing gave me something positive to do with my spare time.

When I was eight-to-thirteen years old, my father always found a way to give me the simplest of supplies. He was a jack-of-all-trades. At one point he worked in produce, then he was an electrician, a plumber, a painter, you name it—my father would either fix it or paint it.

I've been reflecting of late and on how important it was to see someone actually loving the idea of either making something or fixing something or changing something. My dad's workshop was in a cramped space in the basement of our home, and when he was off at work, would go into his workshop and hold the tools that he used to earn his living. At times, my dad hung wallpaper. He would bring home leftover scraps, and I would turn over the pattern side of the wallpaper and draw on the blank side.

My mother read to us. She read the classics and whatever books there were at the time that included African Americans and African American culture.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about where you grew up.

JERRY PINKNEY: I grew up in the Germantown section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I lived on Earham Street, a dead-end street of small row houses. My immediate neighbors were all African Americans that mostly migrated from the South. I think in so many ways, you see that piece reflected in my interest in African American culture and folktales.

There were eight of us: five siblings, myself, and my mother and father all occupying a five-room row house and sharing everything. We shared one bathroom without a sink. Growing up in that kind of space, it was difficult for us all

to find our own personal space. I shared a bedroom with my two older brothers. My personal space became that of the size of a drawing pad.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What were your neighborhood friends like? What did you do together?

JERRY PINKNEY: Exiting Earlham Street, to the left was an Italian community, and to the right was a Jewish community. This was in the 1940's and 50's, and we really didn't socialize with our neighbors outside of Earlham Street; it was just the nature of that time. Also, I went to an all-African American elementary school, so I didn't know those children as schoolmates.

Earlham Street was the place where I both lived and played. With the limitations of not having access to a boys club or swimming pools, we created things. Whether it was a clubhouse, or costuming ourselves after going to see a Western movie, we constantly made things. That was also the time when you could carry a pocketknife around with you, and we would use that pocketknife to whittle.

I remember so clearly that we would study things too. We would search to make things that looked like something. I remember carving a bowie knife out of a piece of lumber because we really loved the whole idea of the West and exploring the West in our make-believe world. Of course, where did that lumber come from, but my father's workshop. His workshop also supplied us with the kind of tools we needed to do other things like build the clubhouse. What a clubhouse it was, too! It had a brick floor, and slats of wood from fences, and a window from an abandoned car. It even had a second floor.

I attribute a lot of my sense for and need to alter and to use my imagination in my artwork to that time in my life.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did your dad's role in your life influence the work you do today?

JERRY PINKNEY: I'm in the process of working with the Norman Rockwell Museum for an exhibition there, and part of the exhibition looks back to things in the past that stimulated me and found their way into my creations today.

I found two books that my dad gave me in the 1960s. They were interior decorating books, with color schemes and all those kind of things. I shared them with the Norman Rockwell Museum folks to connect with the importance of my father, and in doing so, I could see that my endpapers in some books have been inspired by the patterns that came out of those books that my father gave me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Are there other influences from your dad?

JERRY PINKNEY: Yes. I often have an attention to wood grain in my images, and my father loved to refinish old furniture. He had all these tricks that he would share with me of how to bring old grain back to life.

It's interesting to look back and see those influences that somehow connected with me. They were coursing through my veins and would come out, and it's only after 50 years of making images, that I begin to trace back and go, "Hey, wait a minute! That's where that came from!"

The wallpaper was something that resonated with me in terms of pattern and repetitiveness. Oftentimes, you see a kind of rhythm and repetitiveness to a lot of the things I do, in the foliage that I paint and as a motif to talk about space. In my books *God Bless the Child* and *Home Place*, you see how I have established a sense of place by the use of wallpaper.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your learning challenges as a child.

JERRY PINKNEY: Early on in elementary school, I did not seem to be able to keep up with my classmates in reading. I was never a great speller either. There was no word for or understanding of dyslexia at that time. I had to find ways to participate in the classroom without the ability to read and to write papers as well as others. I had to find a way to exist in a classroom and hide those challenges. Yet certainly, most of them were exposed, but there was a kind of unique way that I learned to be okay in the classroom.

My parents understood my struggle, and I never sensed that they thought I could not achieve. My sense of low self-esteem was balanced with the fact that people believed in me. My self-esteem was also kept on an even keel because I quickly understood that there was something about my ability to make pictures.

With all of my difficulties in school, I was a very good student. There must have been some part of me that did want to learn; I was just having difficulties. I graduated from elementary school as the top male student.

TEACHINGBOOKS: That says a lot about your focus and determination and your learning environment.

JERRY PINKNEY: Yes. I'm often in conversations with people who have learning disabilities, and they talk about how they were teased and perhaps laughed at sometimes as children. That was never the case with me. Maybe it was something about my personality, my temperament, but I don't ever remember being teased. I remember the awkwardness of leaving class to go to a special class, but that's all.

TEACHINGBOOKS: There are so many marvelous, generational images and stories in your work. Why are generations so visually present in your folktales, family tales, and so many of your books?

JERRY PINKNEY: Part of what I'm doing with generations is that I try to express in my work pieces of my growing up years that I can look back on with great fondness—specifically, a sense of family. For example, one of the things that I always looked forward to was weekends where my family would visit other relatives, often relatives who lived in the country.

I loved watching the adults actually build a house. There was an excitement and richness to this opportunity to be out of the city, in the country with my cousins, seeing a pulling together of the family—in this case to make a home. That was a very important pocket in my life.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Why is family an important element to you?

JERRY PINKNEY: My mother and my father both moved north as children, and neither one of them talked very much about their lives in the South. It was almost as if their lives began when they moved north. They never went back to the South, at all, and they never talked about it. So, I knew very little about their lives or their parents and grandparents.

In so many ways, I think, I try to fill in that sort of piece of the puzzle with what I imagine extended family that goes back generation-to-generation might be like. In *God Bless the Child* I make an effort to place the story in the 1930's and 40's, and to deal with sharecroppers who migrated from the South to the North.

I think in my own search to go back farther than my father or to begin to understand my father and my mother and their parents and their parents' parents, in a way I kind of manufactured their lives out of what I knew about them personally.

For example, my father loved produce. He was fascinated with this idea of freshness and vegetables and things like that. And my sense was that his family, perhaps, farmed. What I've done in trying to get a sense of history and roots, I have gone on scraps of what I know about my parents to help me fill in the things that I don't know about.

So much of the work that I do actually takes place in the South: *Mirandy and Brother Wind*, *Goin' Someplace Special*, *The Uncle Remus* tales, *John Henry*, we can go on and on and see how many of the stories I've illustrated are rooted in Southern life and Southern culture. I've always been interested in that period. It's fascinating to me that I knew nothing of that as a child growing up, but there was a certain need for me to understand where my parents came from, and that is reflected in my interest in the South.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Is your fascination with the South specific to your family history, or also the broader African American Southern heritage?

JERRY PINKNEY: I think I have this fascination with the South because it identifies my roots; it gives me a sense of where I came from. Even to this day I will quite readily accept an invitation to go south. When I go south, I have a feeling

that I'm closer to my family's origins in the African American experience than in the North.

Before I started travelling south, I would go to a library and try to understand what it must have been like to live in the South, especially the time that my parents might have left. And part of this is a search to find my own identity.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What did you draw when you were younger?

JERRY PINKNEY: Early on I drew from things that were around me, such as the large-format magazines from that period, the 1950s–1960s, like *Life* and *Look*.

At the age of 12, I took my first job working at a newsstand. I would take a drawing pad to work with me. In between selling newspapers, I would draw people waiting for the bus or the trolley. There was a department store right across from my newsstand, and I would draw the window displays. One of the windows was a bridal window. I remember drawing the detailing in lace, and you'll find that level of detailing in the work that I do today.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please share some examples of detailing in your work.

JERRY PINKNEY: You'll find patterns in the skins of wildlife, patterns in clothing. You rarely see a simple dress in my artwork. You'll find plaid or polka dots, or flowers or something.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It sounds like you have always loved drawing. What is it about drawing that is so appealing to you?

JERRY PINKNEY: All of us have places that we can go where we feel most complete. Not only was I rewarded for my efforts by having something after I finished, but drawing also centered me. To this day, I feel the calmest when I'm drawing or when I'm creating images. I love connecting the mind with the hand and producing something—that is very comforting and centering for me.

It also has a way of shutting out other things that are going on in one's life. Drawing creates its own kind of private space. Coupled with certain interests that I want to speak to in my art, it's really kind of a safe haven for me. Creating art is not only a comfort zone, but also a way of speaking to my passions.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are the passions and topics that you choose to illustrate?

JERRY PINKNEY: The process of creating art allows me to learn about the subject I'm illustrating. So, if I want to learn more about plantation life and slavery, I try to find clients that will give me an opportunity to work on projects that will

visualize those experiences of the enslaved African and people of color. I get to learn about my roots, and my artwork allows the reader into that world by creating images that are accessible.

You also see my interest in storytelling, through my illustration of the (often) European stories or narratives that I also grew up with.

It's like trying to find ways to understanding humanity and culture and other things. I have to believe that when I finish a project, that I will not only grow as an artist, but as a person.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about some of your earliest published works.

JERRY PINKNEY: In the 1960s, publishers began to understand this chasm of not having work that spoke to African American history and culture. They began to search out authors of color to publish, and it followed suit that they began to look for artists to illustrate those works.

I was in Boston at the time, and I was working at a studio that was shopping my portfolio around when Little Brown decided to acquire and publish *The Adventures of Spider*. They were aware of my work, and so it was kind of an obvious match for them with African folktales to have an African American illustrate that book.

I loved the idea of text and art, but in the beginning, it was also about work and finding the kind of projects that would not only serve me as an artist but also help me provide for myself. It was more about the project itself.

But, illustrating a children's book was a natural match for me. I must admit, in the very beginning I saw myself doing all kinds of projects, and I was also very interested in doing projects that, at that time, were outside the African American community. I was excited about doing stories—especially folktales—from other cultures such as *Juano and the Wonderful Fish*, a Mexican folktale, or *The Beautiful Blue Jay*, which came from India.

My search to do tales outside of my own experience was probably a search to learn. I was getting my feet wet in the beginning to understand all the cultures.

In the 1970s, I was somewhat embroiled in the Civil Rights movement, and I was starting to get projects that dealt with contemporary African American life. That interested me because I could speak about the life that my relatives and I were living as well as about some of the issues that were affecting African American communities.

I took it on as a mission at that time, and that transformation was not easy. I had been illustrating a world of make believe, and all of a sudden, I'm illustrating a real world. I had to try to interpret subject matter so that my audience, which was probably predominately white, would get some understanding of the humanity and richness in black culture. The more I did those kinds of projects, the more I was fed those projects. That was pretty much my palette of children's books in the 1970s and 80s.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You worked for the Franklin Library as well.

JERRY PINKNEY: Yes. I sought out Franklin Library because I was aware that they were putting out first editions of the classics, and if I worked on those books, that meant that I would read them.

I always wanted to read the classics, and yet, because of my dyslexia, I couldn't get through a novel unless I had to illustrate it. So I approached Franklin Library with the intention that not only would it give me an opportunity to do some great art in editions that were very well produced, but would be my carrot for finishing a novel.

I discovered that I was an excellent person for that kind of a project because, being such a slow reader, and with my great attention to the detail, I was pretty accurate on interpreting the book and making the images match the text.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You are able to have perspective about the work that you've done over the past 50 years. You have illustrated close to a hundred children's books and about thirteen illustrated novels. How would you describe some of the changes in your work over the years?

JERRY PINKNEY: I think the biggest change for me is I have greater opportunities to work with people who are specialists in certain areas. I want to tell a story in the most authentic way as possible. I have always had a curiosity to learn about subject matter and create intricate details in my illustrations.

I also have the opportunity to work with clients that allow me to learn and hone skills on research, such as working with *National Geographic Magazine* or the National Park Service. For those projects, I got to spend time at plantations and meet with consultants in costume and wardrobe and architecture, and I learned how to reconstruct history.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Has anything about your art technique changed over the years?

JERRY PINKNEY: I've worked in coarse pencil and watercolor on paper for the last 30 years or so. Prior to that, like all young artists, I explored a lot of different mediums.

I like to bring a certain sense of humanity and detail to my work, and watercolor allows me to do that. I have fascination and wonder about the line and transparent quality or properties in watercolor. I use watercolor to give voice to what I would like to talk about.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You've gotten to work with some incredible authors and narrators of stories.

JERRY PINKNEY: Yes. Over the years, I've been blessed with collaborating with pretty terrific weavers of words. Most times, a writer and I will share interests and then find that right project to collaborate on together. I have long-lasting relationships with some, such as Julius Lester. With Patricia McKissack and Robert San Souci, I have had really strong and unique ways of collaborating. Of course, working with my wife Gloria Jean was also special in a sense.

Oftentimes in the past, I would not have had the chance to meet with the author, creating a different kind of collaboration. But certainly with Julius, Pat, Bob, and Gloria, there's a special way of sharing—a true collaboration—and being able to understand the others' reasons for taking on and developing a project.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your illustration of books in the public domain.

JERRY PINKNEY: I was very comfortable illustrating projects that spoke to African American culture, but I was encouraged to break away from these kinds of projects because I was beginning to be pigeonholed by them. I bridged my transition by finding those stories that I loved and that stayed with me from my childhood.

For instance, *The Ugly Duckling* was a story that my mother read to us as children. When I was a young adult, someone shared *The Jungle Book* with me, and I was fascinated with how Rudyard Kipling had the animals would do what animals do, and yet they had this special piece where they could talk to one another.

I started to move into public domain work that connected with some part of my growing up years. *Little Black Sambo* and *Sam and the Tigers* are stories I grew up with and of course, there's *John Henry*, which I gradually collaborated on with Julius Lester, but it was the first book I initiated.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to collaborate with Julius Lester on *John Henry*?

JERRY PINKNEY: I wanted to illustrate *John Henry*, and I thought at one point that it would be my first project that I would write the adaptation as well. Then, I realized I was a little over my head and asked Julius if he would be interested in doing the adaptation, and he wrote that amazing text.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Is *The Lion & The Mouse* one of those stories you connected with as a child?

JERRY PINKNEY: I grew up on Aesop's fables. My parents shared those stories so the heavy morals would hopefully guide us in the decisions that we made.

I don't remember when I first heard *The Lion & The Mouse*, but it seems like it's always been part of my path.

I have never fractured my adaptations of folk tales because I want to share those stories that I cared about when I was a child. I'm trying to revisit them and speak to you; trying to have a conversation about why those stories were important to me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about the Pinkney family in the world of children's books.

JERRY PINKNEY: One of the things that I am pleased and proud of is the way that my children and now grandchildren have seen my efforts and also my sense of being happy with what I chose to do in my life.

All of my children are in the arts, if not in publishing. In some way, the arts have played a role not only in their professional life, but in their personal lives as well.

Then we have spouses of my children that are also in the publishing industry. I feel it reflects back on what I do and how my children have responded to what I do. That's a good feeling because for one, they were interested enough in the work that I was doing to find those gifts within themselves and to find the industry attractive.

The other piece that feels good is that I was able to help them along the way, especially in their earlier years. I was both supportive of their art and able to find ways that their art would find that right home.

There is something special there, and it's an opportunity to share on another level with my children.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It sounds like that reflection you were having about your father now coming true for you as well.

JERRY PINKNEY: That is true. The idea of making things comes simply from the kind of joys I saw on my father's face when he accomplished something that he created or altered. What's interesting now is to see this whole growth in my children—to see them find their own spotlight. It is very powerful.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You were the spokesperson for the Fortieth Anniversary of the Coretta Scott King Award. Along with that honor and all of your awards, how do you view some your successes? What's it like to be so decorated and yet so real?

JERRY PINKNEY: I've tried to always keep a sort of balance. I try to use the recognition over the years and the accolades as energy for my work or to help build my confidence. I have no awards visible in my workspace, even though I

certainly pay reverence to those awards. They are tucked away out of sight. I've tried to use the recognition as validation that I'm doing the kind of work that people are interested in and to feel that my work is a contribution.

I also know that those things could perhaps get in the way of taking risks, or could very easily get in the way of stepping out of that comfort zone. So if I face my days in a studio without awards, then I get closer to the kind of things that I want to do.

TEACHINGBOOKS: At the Caldecott-Newbery banquet you smiled and joked about finally winning the Caldecott Medal.

JERRY PINKNEY: I've always been patient about not waiting on things and having a kind of understanding that if it's going to happen, it'll happen. If you do the best work you can, the reward is ultimately your self-satisfaction—the sense that you have done the best you can. And then there's that piece of how others respond.

Up until that January, I had been getting accolades, and I had gotten the support that was positive enough for me to be okay and relax with not having gotten the brass ring. I think maybe it was a mind game for me that if I never won Caldecott medal, that I would feel I had a really successful career in so many other ways.

And, my career would not be what it is today without my wife Gloria Jean. She has really been so important to my working process. We've done five books together, but she's also been my assistant for many years and has been the real key person for finding the models that I've used and costuming those models. She's always there in some way or another.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have a great sense of where things stand in the world of African American history and children's books, and where it might be going or where it should be going. What is your take on the role of African Americans in children's books and publishing?

JERRY PINKNEY: I think if we go back to the 1960s and 1970s where there was a kind of understanding about the need to not only to publish more books that dealt with African American subject matter but also giving opportunity to black writers and artists, I think that we are not yet in a place that I would like to see it after all these years.

I think we're finding that there's probably more of a struggle to get material and narratives published that really speak to black culture. And that has a lot to do with the mergers and buyouts and the corporations being more in control of the purse strings. We find that the projects have to come with higher expectations rather than books that just should be published. That's disturbing because we might find fewer and fewer children's books by African Americans or with black cultural themes.

Another side to this, that might be very positive, is that it may turn out that the universal themes that we are all connected to might surface and be important, so that African American writers and artists, by the very nature of what they do, will actually enhance or bring together people in a way that might be very, very healthy.

For example, I think of my recent years understanding how important it is for me to bring my artistic attention to European folk tales or fairytales. It supports this whole piece that we're all one.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Are there books or themes out there that are still being neglected?

JERRY PINKNEY: I would like to see more books that address the Latino community. We've got to figure out ways to do books that speak to all cultures and all races in a kind of way that reflects what this country is all about.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What progress do you see in children's literature?

JERRY PINKNEY: Children's books are being translated into many languages. Recently, some of my books have been translated into 16 different languages. Most of those books were the classics that I adapted, but China just bought *John Henry*, and Japan just bought *Goin' Someplace Special*. There are all kinds of opportunities internationally that were never there before. That's pretty powerful.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

JERRY PINKNEY: Earlier on, I'd find ways of busy work that would distract me from getting stuck. Of late, I see getting stuck as an opportunity, because that means you really have to dig a little deeper. It's when I get stuck that I do my most creative work. With the success I've had, I know I can be patient now and unlock that gate again in time. Oftentimes, I will immerse myself in the subject, and that will usually reveal an enhancer or solution.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What's a typical day like for you?

JERRY PINKNEY: I tend to get into the studio around 10:00 in the morning. Sometimes I use that early morning to exercise. By the way, I always eat a breakfast, and then, you know, sometimes the early hours are also the best time for me to do some writing because I do a lot of writing for different reasons.

And my creative process, my creative work on the drawing board usually starts around Noon. I tend to warm up to the project. I break for lunch, and I'm trying to get into much healthier attitude towards dinner. I used to wait, and then

dinner was a reward for working hard. So I would have dinner at 9:30 or 10:00, and then sometimes go back to work for an hour or so.

I have a process for developing an idea where I probably spend less time on the board and more time dreaming and researching. When I begin the final art, there could be easily 10-hour days. That is probably the norm, and sometimes it goes longer than that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

JERRY PINKNEY: I think earlier on my emphasis was on sharing with them my process and the reasons I would take on different projects. Now, I try to reach them on a different level. I start out talking about my childhood at the same grade level or age they're at and share my experiences from there.

I like to talk about my challenges as they relate to all of us, and I try to leave them with a sense of what it feels like to succeed at something and to arrive at a goal.

I talk a lot about finding that thing that you feel is important to you, that's your calling, and about the reward you will get from staying with it, no matter what the challenges are.

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