

**Jerry Pinkney** received the 2016 (Laura Ingalls) Wilder Medal for his substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children. His acceptance remarks were delivered at the Newbery-Caldecott-Wilder Banquet on Sunday, June 26, 2016, during the American Library Association Annual Conference.

For more information about the Wilder Award, visit <http://bit.ly/wilder-medal>.



# Wilder

## AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

**W**hen I was notified about the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, I was struck once again with the revelation that drawing changed the trajectory of my life. More than that, actually—drawing changed *me*.

I was born in 1939, smack in the middle of a family of eight, and in the middle of another turbulent era in American history. The country was still recovering from the Dust Bowl; the Great Depression was finally ending; and World War II was just beginning. All children were subjected to air raid drills during the school day, interrupting our studies with the presence of fear and the threat of menace. But no matter what was going on around me, I always found time to draw.

In interviews I'm often asked the question, "How did you become the artist you are today?" And many times, I'm invited to share drawings from my youth, or a photograph of me as a kid in the act of making art. I always have to respond that, unfortunately, I have nothing to offer up. I have no sketches saved from those hours of sitting on the living room floor in the nook underneath the

piano, and no photos of the doodles my father allowed me to draw on the wall next to my bed. I have no high school assignments tucked away in drawers, no prints from the print-making studio at the Philadelphia Museum School of Art. I have nothing to share from my early history of making pictures, nothing that speaks to that passion. Why didn't I save any of that stuff? The simple reason is that I never thought that I could be an artist—or not a real one, anyway—so what would be the point of holding on to anything?

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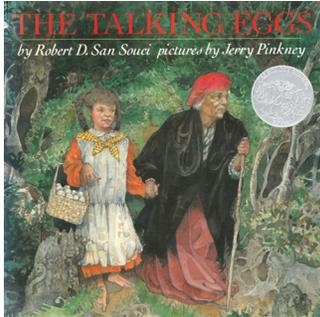
Growing up in Philadelphia in the 1940s, I was very much aware of a racial separation. Just as segregation would not release its hold on the South, in the North, Jim Crow was tightening its grip. Our house was on a dead-end block of row homes with African American neighbors who migrated from the South during the Great Migration. But each day, as I took a left off East Earlham Street toward my all-black elementary school, all-white neighborhoods and factories surrounded our community. In Philly, you didn't see those powerful degrading signs—"whites only" or "colored only"—that you'd experi-

Jerry Pinkney attended the Philadelphia College of Art and illustrated his first children's book in 1964. Since then, he has illustrated over one hundred titles, receiving countless awards, including a Caldecott Medal, five Caldecott Honors, five Coretta Scott King Awards, and four Coretta Scott King Honors, among others. The Society of Illustrators has presented Pinkney with four gold medals, four silver medals, the Hamilton King Award, and the Original Arts Lifetime Achievement Award. He has received honorary doctorates from several universities, most recently an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from New York's Bank Street Graduate School of Education. Pinkney lives with his wife, author Gloria Jean Pinkney, in New York.

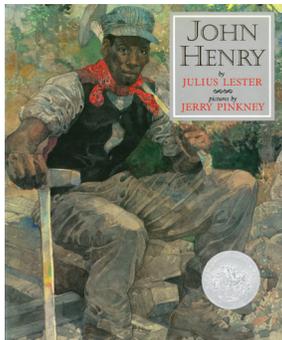
**FUN FACT:** Jerry has illustrated for a wide variety of clients, including the US Postal Service, National Parks Service, and *National Geographic* magazine.



SELECTED TITLES  
BY JERRY PINKNEY



*The Talking Eggs*  
San Souci, Robert D.  
Illus. by Jerry Pinkney  
Dial, 1989



*John Henry*  
Lester, Julius  
Illus. by Jerry Pinkney  
Dial, 1994

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ence in other parts of the country. It was more like being assigned a role, a prescribed way of being. I lived out those days with the coding “you can” and “you can’t.” Art was definitely a “can’t.” Not only were there no artists in my family, but in those early years, there were no models of such a career in my entire universe. I got the sense, echoed again and again, that a person of color should not consider art as a useful endeavor for the future. Instead, we were limited to the armed services or trade labor.

Though I initially accepted that construct, my drawing never stopped. If anything, the need and desire to create only increased, and I was fortunate to have mentors, strong arms lifting me up. My mother, who loved to read, always encouraged me to be true to myself; and my father, a jack-of-all-trades who drew great satisfaction from working with his hands—hanging wallpaper and making over houses—brought home squares of leftover patterned paper from his job so I could sketch on the reverse sides. My grandfather worked at the pencil factory located at the end of our block, so pencils were never in short supply. They were simple tools, but they were all I needed. Spending hours doodling on my own, I learned I could transform my environment through the act of making something. In creating, I could remake the world however I wanted.

Later, as I became more dedicated to drawing, Dad provided me with my own sketchbooks, and I took a pad of paper everywhere—even to my job. At thirteen, I’d been hired to sell newspapers at a stand located at the busy intersection of Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues, and in between barking, “Get your daily newspapers here!” at passersby, I drew. I’d

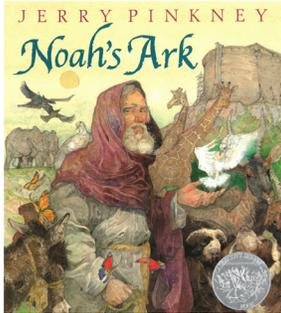
sketch people waiting on the corner for a trolley or bus—working quickly so as not to lose a sale. But my boss, Mr. Matt Schainber, was always supportive, and when it was really slow, he didn’t mind if I spent that time on longer, more focused pieces. I would perch on the edge of my newsstand shelf and draw the display mannequins in the department-store window on the corner. And that’s how I met my first professional artist.

I had a regular customer named John Liney, and one day when he saw me drawing, he asked if I would share my work with him. It was only after flipping through my sketchbook that he revealed that he, too, loved to draw and that in fact his syndicated comic strip, *Henry*, ran in the very newspapers I was selling! Mr. Liney invited me to visit his studio nearby, and I often stopped by to see him at work. Could that be where the idea of many pictures telling a story was seeded for me?

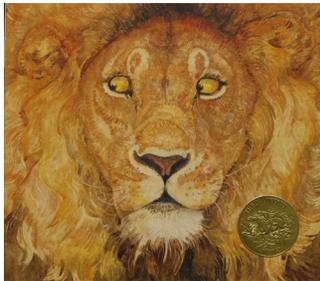
I also always had teachers who stoked my artistic drive. Upon graduating from Roosevelt Junior High, I elected to attend Dobbins Vocational Technical High School, where I could keep my creative flame burning and major in commercial art. One of my mentors during my freshman and sophomore years was Mr. Sam Brown, a colorful and devoted teacher who was also African American. How uplifting that was for me, to see a respected, successful man who came from my community and believed in my abilities! Besides teaching, Mr. Brown also ran a sign-painting shop, and he hired me to work alongside him after school and over summer break. Now, keep in mind that I am dyslexic, so I struggled with words from a young age. Picture this teacher employing a dyslexic kid to paint signs—now



SELECTED TITLES  
BY JERRY PINKNEY



*Noah's Ark*  
Pinkney, Jerry  
Illus. by the author  
SeaStar, 2002



*The Lion and the Mouse*  
Pinkney, Jerry  
Illus. by the author  
Little, Brown, 2009

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that's real support!

Dobbins was also where I met my wife Gloria Jean. When we were magically partnered at a Valentine's Day dance, that was the beginning of what would come to be the great partnership of my life. She encouraged me then, and all these years later, her support is still the rock that I lean on.

However, not everyone had the same faith in my abilities back then. I had a different art teacher during the second half of high school, a man who had always graded on a level playing field, giving fair grades based on talent and hard work. Instead of A-pluses, his big thing was to give A's with hand-drawn wings on each side as marks of excellence. In my senior year at Dobbins, the Philadelphia Board of Education announced it would award three scholarships to art majors from the city's competitive high schools. I thought I had a good shot. After all, I had received quite a few A's with wings—certainly more than my fellow students. Yet, when it was time to apply for college scholarships, this teacher doled out applications only to the white students. Though he believed I had talent and he'd even held up my work as a model for other students, I understand now that this slight was his way of putting black students such as myself on notice to rethink the idea of art as a career.

He wasn't alone, either. My father, who had bought me my first sketchbook and had found ways to enroll me in art classes, joined the naysayers. He believed that when high school ended for me, so would my focus on art. In fairness, how was he to know that there was a future in art for his son, when he was not aware

of African Americans working in that field? Both my father and my teacher were trying to spare me what they envisioned would be too tall a hurdle to clear, too hard a fall. It was that old, misguided refrain again: "You can't have this. This is not for you."

I, myself, did not fully believe in my ability to succeed professionally in art. But I sure knew how it made me feel in the act of making it. Art was my safe harbor, and the joy of making pictures centered and comforted me. It was the only thing I could imagine doing.

I thought of those other supporters, whose hands had lifted me up: my mother; my boss, Matt Schainber; the cartoonist, John Liney; and my former teacher, Sam Brown. I carried their voices with me, spurring me on as I entered the guidance counselor's office. I left with the scholarship application I'd been denied, and then I made sure that all of the other black students in my class had them, too. That year, out of the three scholarships awarded, Dobbins received two of them. I was granted a full scholarship to the art school of my choice—which, back then, was \$1,600 for four years of tuition, if you can believe it. My best friend, who was also African American, received the second scholarship.

So after graduation, I found myself at the Philadelphia Museum School of Art. There, I learned that art school wasn't about becoming an artist. I already *was* an artist—I just had to let it play out! Going forward, the making of art would be my only objective. The *process* is where I would live.

Once I chose to burrow into the pursuit of craft, that elusive art career came more naturally than I had



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imagined. Five years after leaving art school I was working at Barker-Black, an illustration and design studio in Boston, Massachusetts. One of the projects that came into the studio for me was a picture book called *The Adventures of Spider*, with Little, Brown. I completed drawings for that first dummy, and that was it—I was hooked.

In creating picture books, a new world opened up. The book itself became my muse—a vessel that could hold all of the joy and sadness of my growing-up years, all the triumphs and tragedies. By using my personal history, the work became more layered, the drawings more meaningful. Art became the bridge that carried me from the past I wanted to escape into the world I wanted to inhabit. My childhood was limited, but I learned that through my own creativity, the world was limitless.

That first discovery was long ago. Since then, I have spent countless hours at my drawing board, and I can only imagine how many brushes, pencils, tubes of watercolor, and sheets of paper I have gone through. All have been key ingredients in a rich stew of visual storytelling. Be it a folktale, a fairy tale, a Bible story, a fable, a poem, or a nonfiction piece, my intent has always been to awaken the emotional palette—to make viewers laugh, cry, ponder, and, most of all, to feel compassion. And after fifty years of illustrating books, it is incredibly meaningful to receive an award for what they tell me is making “a substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children” while doing something I always needed to do for myself. All along, I was drawing my dream.

Spending so many years working toward this dream has created a deep well of thank-yous. To my family, first and foremost, especially my parents, Willie Mae and James. Though initially it was hard for my father to accept my career path, and he rarely asked about my work when he was alive, after he passed away in 1999, I was surprised to hear my sisters recall how he had raved about his successful son, the artist. I still credit him and my mother for planting those first seeds of creativity and drive in me.

My deepest thanks go to my wife, Gloria Jean, an author in her own right, who is my soul mate and cornerstone, for her love, encouragement, support, and counsel over fifty-six years of marriage and even longer as the best of friends. And to my four children, nine grandchildren, and one great-granddaughter. That great affection extends, of course, to my extended family, whose welcome presence has made my smile a little wider and my love of family even stronger.

To all the mentors and special individuals who have championed me, who watered the seeds my parents planted to help me grow, my sincere gratitude. Two years ago, I found out that my teacher, Sam Brown—the one with the sign-painting business—had also been a watercolorist. In 2014, the Philadelphia Museum of Art acquired the jacket art for my Caldecott Honor Book *John Henry*, for a 2015 exhibit titled “Represent: 200 Years of African American Art.” Imagine my surprise when I attended the opening and saw my high school teacher’s paintings displayed along the same wall as my own! As it turns out, Mr. Brown had been a respected and well-acknowledged painter in the 1930s, but had never shared his passion with me. Is it possible that Mr. Brown had sim-

ply given up? Or that his own hurdles were too high?

It makes me all the more grateful for the continued professional encouragement I have received throughout my career, from the authors who have allowed me the opportunity to provide the visual storyline to their text, and from my publishers, who have given me so much creative freedom. Dial Books, with its rich history, has been a long-term home, and from my very first book published in 1964, I’ve also had a steady and fruitful collaboration with Little, Brown. Fortunately, that first book was just the beginning, and since those early days, I have worked on over one hundred titles!

I learned about bookmaking and the craft of storytelling from three of the best and most dedicated citizens of children’s literature: publisher and editor Phyllis Fogelman, art director Atha Tehon, and publisher and editor David Reuther. My longtime editors Andrea Spooner, Lauri Hornik, and Anne Schwartz, along with art director Lily Malcom, also warrant special recognition for their diligence and attention over the years. In truth, there have been many, many people working together to make my books a reality, and each of those individuals deserves a shout-out, but they are far too numerous to list here. For now, let me acknowledge all of the editors and art directors, and all the people who make up the production, marketing, publicity, and sales teams that bring my efforts into being.

To my agent, Shelly Fogelman, for his guidance and friendship for the past twenty-five years. In order for me to be at my best, I need a sense of clarity on how to navigate every aspect of bookmaking management, and he has shepherded my career through



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all of the twists and turns in the ever-shifting world of publishing.

I want to thank the American Library Association for this tremendous recognition, and for the commendable work done by its members. Above all, these awards demonstrate a continued commitment to putting books in the hands of young people, paving the way for the next generation of readers and thinkers who will change their world and impact ours. They will need our attention and support to find that vision, and the timing has never been more critical.

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We have our work cut out for us—all of us. I'm saddened that we still have too many children waking up in a world where the odds are stacked against them, where they don't feel

safe in their own communities. This year I've had the opportunity to visit with many elementary school students and witness some of the most dedicated and caring staff doing their best to meet the challenges of our time. Just recently, I spent time with Matthew, a first grader who loves to draw. Since I was presenting to the second grade at his school and Matthew wouldn't get to experience my talk, a thoughtful instructional coach invited him to share his art projects with me as I had lunch. Matthew comes from a difficult home life, and though he was labeled as a troublemaker, I found him articulate, smart, and talented, with an infectious smile. It was obvious he was using his art as a refuge. Later, I sent Matthew a package containing some of my books, along with drawing pads and

pencils, but it was that instructor's attention that filled my heart with hope and optimism. Librarians and teachers have the most important job, in a sense: for kids like Matthew, they are the keepers of dreams, the dispensers of possibility.

That was certainly true for me, growing up. So, to all of the people who have supported me through the years, who have opened my books and shared them with others: thank you for your belief in me. It is you whom I have felt nudging me to always stay true to drawing my dream.



For more information about the Wilder Award, visit <http://bit.ly/wilder-medal>.

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