Jerry Pinkney joined the likes of Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol when he became a featured artist at The High Museum of Art in Atlanta in 2013. Witness: The Art of Jerry Pinkney celebrated Mr. Pinkney’s 50-year career and was the first exhibit of a children’s book illustrator that the High Museum has featured. His extensive body of creative work features national monuments and illustrations for National Geographic, as well as commercially focused art, including stamps for the US Postal Service. He is most well known, though, for illustrating children’s books. While in Atlanta for the initial exhibit opening, Jerry Pinkney sat down with Language Arts to talk about his artistic process, his work, and his thoughts on guiding child artists.

Since 1964, Jerry Pinkney has illustrated more than 100 children’s books. During this time, he has served an important role in bringing previously absent stories and voices to children’s literature. In a publishing field where African American authors and illustrators continue to have limited opportunities to represent themselves and their communities (CCBC, 2013), Mr. Pinkney consistently features stories that focus on African American experiences, present African American history, and bring little-known sides to historical events into account. Furthermore, his work provides a unique perspective on stories that are often well known while maintaining authenticity. As illustrator James Ransome has said of Mr. Pinkney’s work, “[i]t is] the most authentic work out there and he does it all from his studio. He doesn’t go anywhere, but he’s an excellent researcher” (McNair, 2005, p. 28–29).

Mr. Pinkney is especially known as a maker of images that provide a level of intricate detail rare for a watercolorist. He has won numerous prestigious awards for his work, including the Caldecott and Coretta Scott King Awards. Known for books such as The Talking Eggs, Mirandy and the Wind, and The Lion & the Mouse, he most recently published The Tortoise & the Hare in 2013.

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and it always allows the line to play an active role in the work itself. Also, watercolor suits my temperament. You have to be in the present with it. You have to watch for what they call “happy accidents.” And as a result, every time I sit down at the drawing board and begin a watercolor, it’s like almost starting anew. It’s very challenging, and I need a challenge.

**LA:** You do quite a bit of research on your costumes and settings to make sure they’re authentic. How does that fit into your process?

**Jerry:** It’s part of that learning arc or the way of actually getting to know a subject very well. You know, the research is important, and while you’re doing that research, you’re beginning to have a more rounded understanding of the subject. The other thing is that it’s always important for me to feel that I’m learning something—that I’m growing as a person. I think about when I was at school, research was something you sort of strayed away from or leaped over. Now I find, as an adult, how rewarding it is to find something new for the first time.

**LA:** Do you do the research and then set it aside and begin the art, or do you find yourself going back to it?

**Jerry:** I go back and forth. I immerse myself in the research, learning about the subject, then I start drawing. And then I have to go back, of course, once I have a fuller sense of what the images are going to look like. Some of the research will certainly sit there as inspiration and other parts of it will be information.

**LA:** Two of your recent picturebooks have been wordless: *The Lion and the Mouse* and *The Tortoise and the Hare*. What attracts you to that genre?

**Jerry:** Well, *The Lion and the Mouse* did not start out to be wordless. I had illustrated *The Lion and the Mouse* in a collection of *Aesop’s Fables*, so I knew the story well enough to sit down and figure that I would do a visual storyboard in terms of no text, and then I would return to that as I developed the dummy book, which is that process of going from the thumbnails to a model of the book. I began to think about what text I would add. But before it got there, something happened where I felt that there was an opportunity here, maybe, not to include words. But it had to be tested.

I went back to my editor, and we had the discussion. She agreed that she didn’t feel it needed words. Now at the same time, we have a great-granddaughter, and she was around three at the time. I was very much aware of teaching her animals and creatures by making the sounds and then the names would follow. Also, I realized that as a young, active three-year-old, she was not one to sit in your lap or next to you and read the book. She moves around a lot. I found that she liked the idea of taking some ownership, of finding some pieces of that particular story that she could sort of retell or invest herself in it. So that was a thought I had—a book that became not necessarily interactive (but maybe you can use that word), where young readers would take some ownership of how the story ended or maybe where the pictures inspired them or prompted them to think about adding something to the story.

At that same time, I was deeply concerned with technology, and how young children were used to pushing buttons and, in a sense, moving things around a bit, depending on what they wanted and what they were asking from that particular project or game. So I wanted my book to have that same feeling.

**LA:** In many ways, the absence of print allows the adult to be quiet and to step back a little bit more than they otherwise would.

**Jerry:** Exactly. You know, I hear the stories—the feedback, of course, is that a grandmother or a mother offers up the book to a child. And they read it, and they go back and reread it. And they’re visually reading the pictures and creating a new story or a new storyline each time they go back and revisit the book. That aspect of
it I didn’t really know would happen. You’d only know that when it was in the hands of a young child.

That’s spurred me to thinking about another fable, The Tortoise and the Hare. We started out this time with the intent of making it wordless, and then after I finished the dummy book, I decided that the moral would play a role and actually be an element in the book. So as you read the book now, you have, “slow,” “slow and,” “slow and steady,” “slow and steady wins the race” on those pages where you see the tortoise. So I guess it’s wordless and yet we have the moral, but the moral is a character and a very important element in the book itself.

**LA:** So you have that as a character, and you talked about having the art and the celestial light as characters in Noah’s Ark.

**Jerry:** All of it becomes elements—yes, essential characters. That way it’s a mindset that allows me to really focus in on those pieces and not a backdrop. They’re essentially important. So there’s a portrait of lightning [laughter].

**LA:** You’ve mentioned in one place we’ve read that perhaps the fact that you read slowly might help you—might be related to the fact that your illustrations are so detailed.

**Jerry:** Yeah. It’s an interesting thing. I discovered that in the effort of being able to take in what I’m reading at that slow pace, I am also building up detail. I am a visual learner, so I actually store up certain important details. I think a reader who reads very quickly might not do that as well. When it came to certain projects, I could go back and refer to parts of the text that would help me decide what I was going to illustrate. So in many ways, it was a tool that I could use. I could remember and store those images and use them as references to the finished art.

**LA:** We love the way you talk about us—as considering our struggles as places we can use as jumping off points.

**Jerry:** Oh sure. Exactly. I know as a young child, for instance, what kept my self-esteem intact was the fact that I could do something unique or special that my friends or my fellow students couldn’t do. So it kept it balanced. Even though I struggled in those other areas, there was this piece of Jerry Pinkney that was exceptional. So I leaned on it. It also allowed me to spend more energy and invest more time in those areas where I was not as sufficiently skilled than in other areas. I would take this part of Jerry Pinkney that had this special quality, and I would use it to sort of somehow leap over those hurdles where I was not as adept as I would like.

**LA:** What are you working on right now?

**Jerry:** Another fable, which is The Grasshopper and the Ants. I thought that I would put that off for awhile and perhaps tackle something else, but I am making a connection to the fable that sort of makes sense that I sit in that pocket. The other piece that the publishers liked was, of course, that it could become a trilogy. But I’m connecting to it as something that was important to me as a child, and also to the moral and how morals should be part of a child’s growing up experience today.

**LA:** And so you continue to go back to important historical stories, fables, Bible stories, and stories that have morals. Were they important to you growing up?

**Jerry:** They were. I mean, I think one of the things I didn’t quite understand is how colonial America, say, would fit into contemporary times. As a kid growing up, I don’t think there were connections made between history and how you learn from history and use it today. I think in many ways this going back is allowing me to all of a sudden realize that those subjects that were taught in school did have value that I did not recognize at the time. The other piece, of course, is that when you do study colonial America, the history of America, you include the contributions of African Americans or the contributions of people of color to this country, as well as the context of the Civil War and freedom for the slaves. As an adult, that’s of great interest for me.
Of course, going back and revisiting folktales and fairy tales was also important. I was introduced at a very young age to folktales and the Uncle Remus tales. I grew up in a community that was all African American, but in that mix of traditions—the oral tradition of telling stories, especially the southern tradition—we as children were also being read the European folktales and fairy tales—Hans Christian Andersen and The Brothers Grimm.

LA: You’ve made important contributions in both genres—historically, in bringing in lenses that often aren’t there, and then in representing tales that are often left untold.

Jerry: Exactly. Yes.

LA: You all have been referred to as the Pinkney Dynasty with you at the head. I have this image of you all sitting around this family room—everybody just engaged in their art. Is that at all true?

Jerry: Well [laughter]. In a sense, with the children growing up, I think that was very, very much true. There was always a common space where we supplied the materials—no instruction—but certain materials to work with. As adults, there are members of the family that are not in the business of publishing, so when we are together, we try to find a common ground, and we don’t talk about publishing. We talk about the concerns of their children and their careers and things like that. So the family becomes a tight unit where everybody’s included.

LA: And support each other in different ways.

Jerry: Exactly. Yes.

LA: Was there no instruction at all?

Jerry: No instruction at all. They grew up in a culture of art in a sense: our friends were artists, Gloria and I would take them to museums. There was a period in their young lives where they studied at the Elma Lewis School of Art, where they studied drawing and painting and music and dance. So they grew up in an atmosphere of being creative. And certainly, we knew how to fill their creative needs when they would pop up. But there wasn’t really a sense that we wanted them to become artists. What we wanted them to do was to make choices that were their own choices. And we also wanted, whatever that choice, that art itself—through dance and through drama and through music—would enhance their lives. We knew that the environment of producing creative works and actually beginning to appreciate and understand art would enhance their lives—again no matter what they chose to do.

LA: You’ve gotten to work with so many amazing people. Some in your own family, but also Patricia McKissack, Robert San Souci, and Julius Lester, for example. How have those collaborative processes worked?

To listen to the full conversation, please go to the podcast at http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts.

Jerry: Well, you know, there are two things happening there in terms of those collaborations. In most cases, especially if you go back to the very early works, the collaboration was in a kind of traditional way, where the publisher acquires a manuscript and then finds the appropriate artist. You mentioned Bob San Souci and Julius Lester and Patricia McKissack, and of course, Gloria Jean Pinkney. With Julius, it is more a back and forth where we find mutual interests. With Bob San Souci, I would look at the stories that he would adapt and reimagine. Very often, I would get him to write the text in a manner that would heighten the visual experience of the book. In the case of The Hired Hand, for instance, the seasons change. They did not originally, but I thought, “Look Bob, if the seasons would change, you would have that dramatic shift in color.” With Gloria Jean and with Pat McKissack, in some ways, it’s the sort of traditional, classic way of responding to a text after it’s been edited and finalized.

LA: What advice do you have for teachers related to the young picturebook makers in their classrooms?

Jerry: Well, see it this way—art as a learning tool for them to understand writing and also the visual. Hopefully, that instruction also supports their need to read and look at picturebooks or to look at pictures, and hopefully they’ll understand that the actual making of art can lead to something.
LA: What advice do you have for children who want to be artists or are already picturebook makers?

Jerry: Carry a sketchbook. Draw whatever you see around you. If it’s mimicking comic books, that’s something. If it’s actually responding to something around you, that’s something. Have your relatives sit down for a sketch or portrait or something like that. Just make sure that they’re always drawing. I still think that the best advice for any child who wants to become even a game designer—no matter what instruction you can give—is to draw from life, because it really is about nurturing and growing that connection between what one visualizes in their mind to what they can put down on paper.

LA: Is there anything else you’d like to say?

Jerry: Well, I think in terms of the body of my work, one of the things that has always been important is that I use this gift that I have to actually speak to passions and interests and concerns. A lot of my work grows out of that. I love to always return to the fables because they teach something that’s important today. Each fable responds to technology or the sense of urgency that we all have in our lives. “Slow and steady wins the race” may calm us down. The Lion and the Mouse is a moral about the mouse, actually, something as small as the mouse having to be the rescuer of something much mightier—the majestic lion. The Grasshopper and the Ant and “Never leave for tomorrow what you could be doing today”—that moral—all these things hold true for these fast-paced lives that we live.

References