



Alice Childress

“*When I’m writing, characters seem to come alive; they move my pen to action, pushing, pulling, shoving, and intruding. I visualize each scene as if it were part of a living play I am pleased when readers say that my novels feel like plays, because it means they are very visual.*

— Alice Childress”

Quick Facts

- * 1920-1994
- * African-American playwright, novelist, and actor
- * Key figure in the Harlem Renaissance

Biography

Alice Childress was born to a working-class black family in Charleston, South Carolina. Her parents separated when Alice was 9, and she moved to Harlem to live with her maternal grandmother. Childress’ move to New York marked the beginning of her creative and artistic period. Her grandmother, though not formally educated, encouraged Childress’ talent in reading and writing. Childress attended public school in New York City for her middle and high school education, showing significant potential in her literary work and self-expression.

After graduating, Childress became involved in the theater. During the Harlem Renaissance, Harlem had become a hotbed for young, black artistic talent, and Childress was no exception. Throughout the 1940s, she studied and participated in theatrical productions at the American Negro Theater. In these years, Childress earned a name for herself as a talented actress. During this period, Childress also became involved in social causes - she championed the creation of an off-Broadway union for actors, and to this end she worked alongside the Actor’s Equity Association and the Harlem Stage Hand Local Union.

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Biography continued

At this time Childress' career in writing - both prose and plays - truly blossomed. Her first play, *Florence*, touched on a subject near to her own experiences - a black mother refuses to support her daughter's desire to act until she has an encounter with a rude white actress on the subway. This experience encourages the mother to support her daughter's acting ambitions. Florence met with much critical support, and one of her next plays *Trouble in Mind*, won the Obie Award for the best off-Broadway play in 1956. (The play was produced in the 50's but not formally published until 1971.) These works demonstrated Childress' talent and her dedication to the causes of young black women.

One of Childress' most influential (and controversial) works was *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But A Sandwich*. Directed primarily at teens and young adults, the novel drew fire from many critics for broaching controversial subjects such as drug use, sexual relationships, and unreasonable parental expectations. This novel was one of the books cited as offensive in the famous *Island Trees Union Board of Education vs. Pico* Supreme Court case, in which a number of concerned parents targeted books they believed were inappropriate for the school's library. This book was also made into a motion picture in 1978, and Childress wrote its screenplay.

Childress' legacy will always be her compassionate but realistic portrayal of both blacks and whites - and their relationships - in plays, novels, and shorter prose. Childress was awarded the Paul Robeson Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Arts for her continued work in a multitude of literary mediums. Not only is her work critically acclaimed, it also helped to raise awareness about important issues such as equal rights for minorities, women's opportunities, and the importance of art and storytelling in society. In her later years, Childress lectured at Fisk University and Radcliffe.

Even to the end of her days, Childress was dedicated to literature. When she passed away, she was working on a story about her African great-grandmother, who had been a slave. Though Childress died on Aug. 14, 1994 in New York City, her literary legacy will be remembered, both on the page and on the stage.



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