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# Draw What You See: The Life And Art Of Benny Andrews



## Synopsis

Benny Andrews loved to draw. He drew his nine brothers and sisters, and his parents. He drew the red earth of the fields where they all worked, the hot sun that beat down, and the rows and rows of crops. As Benny hauled buckets of water, he made pictures in his head. And he dreamed of a better life "something beyond the segregation, the backbreaking labor, and the limited opportunities of his world." Benny's dreams took him far from the rural Georgia of his childhood. He became one of the most important African American painters of the twentieth century, and he opened doors for other artists of color. His story will inspire budding young artists to work hard and follow their dreams.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 4 - 7 years

Grade Level: Preschool - 3

## Customer Reviews

[View larger](#) Benny Andrews: Too Short a Time - The Author's Personal Story Behind The Book In the fall of 2005, I was invited to Savannah, GA, to autograph copies of the children's picture book Delivering Justice: W.W. Law and the Fight for Civil Rights. My late husband, Jim Haskins, had written the book, but sadly had not lived to see it published. I knew that the book's illustrator, Benny Andrews, had also been invited to Savannah, but I had never met him. As I sat in the departure lounge at La Guardia Airport in New York City, I noticed a man in a red sweater with a white beard and a shock of white hair and knew it must be him. I introduced

myself, and we started to talk and we hardly stopped until our Southern venture, as Benny called it, ended two days later. Benny was the kind of man whom you felt you had known all your life the moment you met him. And, as it turned out, we had a lot in common: Back in the late 1960s, he was part of an artists' group that had picketed the museum where I was employed, demanding exhibitions of the work of artists of color. I had been the museum representative chosen to speak to the protesters, so we had probably met all those years ago. He had taught painting at Union Settlement Association, a nonprofit organization in East Harlem with which I had close ties. We also shared lots of stories about the book business. After that, Benny would sometimes send letters, along with clippings and notices of new books or exhibitions. He wrote the letters in longhand. He said he had tried email for one day. A friend had sent him an email message, then another email message asking if he had received the first one. He decided that people who communicated by email were just too impatient. In the early months of 2006 I attended an exhibition of Benny's illustrations for another children's picture book at The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and an exhibition of his collages at the ACA Gallery. At both I met artists, photographers, and writers whom Benny had befriended, encouraged, and helped. When both events were over, he treated everyone to dinner at local restaurants. I did not know that he had been diagnosed with cancer and had decided to celebrate his life and work and friends in this way. Benny and my husband had started work on a second children's picture book together: *John Lewis in the Lead: A Story of the Civil Rights Movement*. After Jim passed away, I completed work on the text. By the time I traveled to San Diego, CA, in the fall of 2007 to accept the Carter G. Woodson Award for the book, neither Jim nor Benny was alive to share the honor. I felt very lonely accepting the award in their memories. I hope this book will give you some sense of the Benny Andrews I was privileged to know for too short a time.

Gr 4â "6â "Benny Andrews began drawing when he was able to hold pencil in his hands and "once he started, he never stopped." He was born in 1930, one of 10 children to sharecroppers, and attended high school at a time when few of his friends had similar opportunities. After the service and college, Andrews went to New York City, where his work began to blossom: in scenes of Harlem life, the jazz world, and of his Georgia childhood. Social causes and injustice, particularly the civil rights movement and the exclusion of African American and female artists from museums fueled both his art and activism. Thick with broad, vibrant swatches of greens, blues, and reds and incorporating collage elements, the artist's folklike paintings depicted the world around him "and illustrate Benson's moving and accessible picture book biography. Whether two or three

dimensional, existing on a shallow stage or in an expansive landscape, Andrews's often elongated, stylized figures carry weight and their postures tell stories of oppression, of joy, of curiosity, and of pride. Readers will recognize the artist as the illustrator of Jim Haskins's *John Lewis in the Lead* (Lee & Low, 2006), *Delivering Justice* (Candlewick, 2005), and *Langston Hughes* (Sterling, 2006). His poignant portrayals of the human condition in these and other titles and in paintings hanging on museum walls long ago earned him the title he chose for himself: the "people's painter." A powerful work about an influential artist and activist.â "Daryl Grabarek, School Library Journal

Born in Plainview, Georgia, in 1930, African American artist Benny Andrews started to draw when he was three years old and never stopped. This picture-book biography describes the determined and successful life of Andrews, born to parents who worked multiple jobs to keep their 10 children fed. While his classmates went to work the cotton fields, he dreamed of leaving. With helpâ "and a three-mile walk to schoolâ "Andrews finished his education and eventually enrolled in art school in Chicago. Throughout his life, his art focused on the people around him, from Chicagoâ 's jazz musicians to New Yorkâ 's civil rights activists. He also became an art teacher, fighting for equal rights for African Americans and espousing that â œart is for everyone,â • whether they are prison inmates or children recovering from Hurricane Katrina. Thereâ 's no better illustrator for this narrative than Andrews himself. His folk art style features paint and fabric collages with elongated forms and tactile brushstrokes. Photographs, an authorâ 's note, and a detailed time line offer more information on this influential American artist. Grades 2-4. --Angela Leeper

This book, like its subject, is a treasure. As an elementary art teacher (pre-k through 5th), I give this book my highest recommendation. Too often, the art curriculum is weighted heavily in favor of a small group of European artists and lacks figures to whom students can relate. Benny Andrews was a personable artist from humble beginnings, growing up in the segregated south. He would go on to paint lively and rhythmic portraits that were informed by his childhood experiences as well as his time in Chicago and New York in the wake of the Harlem Renaissance. There is no one better than Andrews himself to illustrate this book, particularly since for much of his career he was a children's book illustrator (check out *The Hickory Chair* and *Delivering Justice*). I have used this book with students in grades 1 - 5, and the students have responded with great interest. This would be a wonderful book for a child with an interest in art or history, or for a class studying art history (including art from the Civil Rights Movement and the Harlem Renaissance) or the artistic elements of rhythm and movement.

beautiful

A beautiful book! Great illustrations!

I was not familiar with Benny Andrews' work when I checked this out of the library to read with my daughter. We love, love picture book biographies so I was excited to read this since the illustrations are all by Andrews himself. I empathize with illustrators at times who have the monumental task of illustrating a book about an amazing artist. They often fall short in some way when compared to the book's subject. Uphill task really. So it was fabulous to see Andrews' own amazing illustrations. We stopped and spent time looking at every picture. Benson is correct when she said that Andrews was a "master at capturing movement on the still canvas." The part I did not like was the writing itself. The author definitely had an agenda and it was just too obvious. I love when books have powerful messages and they grip onto you and allow you to "discover" the message yourself. Instead, Benson tells us several times that Andrews wanted to get a good education to escape the poverty of his childhood. She tells us this instead of showing us. She tells us that he wanted to get away from working on farms owned by "white people." Why not just show us that his work unified people and broke racial barriers at the time? I want to feel a story. I want to discover amazing truths. I want to feel the triumph. I never want to just be told what to think or feel. The book itself feel short for me. Still worth reading just to learn more about the amazing Benny Andrews though and I do love his lesson of "draw what you see."

Author Kathleen Benson uses the vibrant paintings of artist Benny Andrews to illustrate his story. And what a story it is. As a child Benny loved to draw the world around him. One of ten children, Benny's parents worked as sharecroppers in the cotton fields near Plainview, Georgia. His love for art and school helped him overcome a difficult childhood and graduate high school. From there, Benny pursued his goal to go to art school in Chicago. Because of his unique ability to vividly portray African American culture and history, Benny's paintings made him famous. As a respected artist and teacher he raised awareness of civil rights issues and social justice. Benny Andrews' fifteen colorful and captivating paintings, including two dazzling two-page spreads, by themselves are worth the price of admission. His story is an inspiration to budding artists everywhere. "Draw What You See: The Life and Art of Benny Andrews" is an art treasure.

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