

# PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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## Chapter 8: Alice Childress (1916-1994)

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Source: [Women of Color Women of Word](#)

### Chronology (from Jennings xv-xvi, listed below)

- 1916 Alice Herndon Childress born in Charleston, South Carolina, 12 October.
- 1925 Taken to Harlem after parents separate to live with maternal grandmother, Eliza Campbell White.
- 1935 Daughter Jean R. Childress born 1 November.
- 1940 Appears as Dolly in John Silvera and Abram Hill's *On Striver's Row*.
- 1941 Joins the American Negro Theatre. Appears as Polly Ann in Theodore Browne's *Natural Man*.
- 1944 Role in the Broadway production of *Anna Lucasta* draws Tony Award nomination.
- 1948 Appears as Sadie Thompson in John Colton and Clemence Randolph's adaptation of Somerset Maugham's *Rain* and as Muriel in Harry Wagstaff Gribble's *Almost Faithful*.
- 1949 *Florence* (Play).
- 1950 *Just a Little Simple* (Play).
- 1952 *Gold through the Trees*, first professionally produced play by an African American woman.
- 1953 Appears in the off-Broadway production of *The World of Sholom Aleichem* and as Bella in George Tabori's *The Emperor's Clothes*.
- 1954 *Trouble in Mind* (Play).
- 1956 *Like One of the Family & Conversations from a Domestic's Life* (anthologized vignettes). First woman to receive Obie Award, for *Trouble in Mind*.
- 1957 Marries musician Nathan Woodard, 17 July.
- 1960 Appears as Mrs. Thurston in Warren Miller and Robert Rossen's *The Cool World*.
- 1965 Appears on BBC discussion panel, "The Negro In the American Theatre."
- 1966 *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White* (Play).
- 1966-68 Attends Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study.
- 1968 *The Freedom Drum*, later retitled *Young Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Play).
- 1969 *String: Wine in the Wilderness* (Play).
- 1970 *Mojo* (Play).

1971 Visits Russia to study Soviet life, art, and culture.  
1972 *Wedding Band* performed at the Shakespeare Public Theatre, New York.  
1973 *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a sandwich* (novel). Visits mainland China to observe the theater arts in Peking and Shanghai.  
1974 Visits University of Ghana, West Africa, for summer drama festival.  
1975 *When the Rattlesnake Sounds* (Play).  
1976 *Let's Hear It for the Queen* (Play).  
1977 Alice Childress Week celebrated in Charleston and Columbia, South Carolina. *Sea Island Song*, later retitled *Gullah*, performed (Play).  
1978 Premiere of film version of *A Hero Ain't Nothin'; but a Sandwich*.  
1979 *A Short Walk* (novel).  
1980 *Rainbow Jordan* (novel).  
1984 Artist-in-residence at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.  
1987 *Moms: A Praise Play for a Black Comedienne*.  
1989 *Those Other People* (novel).  
1990 Daughter Jean dies of cancer, 14 May.  
1994 Childress dies of cancer in Queens, New York, 14 August.

## Primary Works

Plays: *Florence*, 1949; *Just a Little Simple*, 1950; *Gold through the Trees*, 1952; *Trouble in Mind*, 1954; *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*, 1966; *Young Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 1968; *String: Wine in the Wilderness*, 1969; *Mojo*, 1970; *When the Rattlesnake Sounds*, 1975; *Let's Hear It for the Queen*, 1976; *Gullah*, 1977. *Moms: A Praise Play for a Black Comedienne*, 1987.

Novels *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, 1973; *A Short Walk*, 1979; *Rainbow Jordan*, 1980; *Those Other People*, 1989.

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A Student Project for Professor Reuben's English 4990: Senior Seminar: American Drama, Spring 2003.

### A Student Project by Gena Mc Kinsey

Alice Childress was born on October 12, 1916 in Charleston, South Carolina. After her parents separated, she moved to Harlem with her mother, where she attended public school. She lived with her maternal grandmother, Eliza Campbell White, who taught her to, "approach her life as an education" (682). Childress was known to frequent the museums and libraries of New York. Her mother encouraged her to, "make up stories about the people she watched and to study the behavior and culture of New York City's melting pot" (682). Childress's formal education halted, after two years of high school, when her mother and maternal grandmother died. Childress then gave birth to a daughter in 1935. She was alone and was forced to support herself and her child.

In 1940 she joined the American Negro Theatre (ANT) in Harlem, "where she proceeded to do everything there is to be done in the theatre" (Jennings ix). Childress was an actor before becoming a writer. By the end of the decade, she completed her first play *Florence*. This one-act play commenced her writing career. She wrote twelve plays, one anthologized vignettes, three children's books, and one novel. Childress was the first black woman to get her plays professionally produced on stage in New York. For all of her accomplishments as a Black Woman, her efforts went largely unnoticed.

Alice Childress was not a well known playwright in her time. Even today, her writing continues to be overlooked by critics, writers, theater historians, and scholars. Her writing did not follow in the shadow of the male dramatist; rather she had her own agenda with her writing. The men and women playwrights from the mid-century, "put race before gender, they conjointly fostered the myopic belief that truly stirring and captivating race drama was sensationalized, male-focused drama. Given priority treatment in their plays were the themes of lynching and the denigration and disenfranchisement of the black soldier" (Jennings ix). Childress's plays would allude to some of these same themes, but her main rationale was to combine her gender with her art. She shocked her audiences and critics with her skilled characterization of African Americans.

Her first play, *Florence* 1949 was Childress's first endeavor in her professional playwriting. This play was written overnight, which critics contribute to its simplicity. Others have noted that if you study this play with a, "deeper analysis, however, reveals a subtly powerful, well-crafted play" (Jennings 20). Childress's main point is that Blacks, not their white counterparts, must fight for "political and economic equality" (Jennings 22). Childress lived in a society where Blacks were not allowed to share White space. They were not allowed to enter through the same door as White people, drink from the same fountains, even ride on the same bus. This type of inhumane treatment fueled her writings. In 1950 she wrote *Just a Little Simple*, which was based on Langston Hughes's novel *Simple Speaks His Mind*. This play was first produced in New York City at Club Baron Theatre. Her next endeavor, *Gold Through the Trees* was the first play ever professionally produced in New York City by a Black Woman. Her next play, *Trouble in Mind*, was produced Off-Broadway, directed by Childress, at Greenwich Mews Theatre on November 3, 1955. In this play, Childress creates a play within a play. She continues her theme with sexism and racism. This play "weighted with allusions to places and incidents associated with the turbulent civil rights movement that began in the 1950's" (Jennings 27). When this play was produced, Childress used a drastically diverse cast, for the 1950's, to demonstrate an anti-lynching drama. Her next play did not surface until 1966.

| [Top](#) | *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate story in Black and White* was first produced in Ann Arbor, Michigan at the University of Michigan, on December 7, 1966. It was later produced Off-Broadway in the New York Shakespeare Festival Theatre, directed by Childress and Joseph Papp, on September 26, 1972. This play explores interracial, heterosexual relations, and black women's rights. The play was about an interracial relationship that takes place in South Carolina during World War 1. It also conveys the differential treatment between the lower socioeconomic groups within the same racial identity. This play can be, "read today as a history lesson pointed at white women to remind them and us, in 1966 or now, that our vision of sisterly equality has always left some sisters out" (Wiley 185). She is also challenging the rigid laws that prohibited white men from marry black women. In 1968 she wrote *The Freedom Drum* later re-titled *Young Martin Luther King, Jr.* Then, in 1969 she wrote *String: Wine in the Wilderness*, and *Mojo*. She took a five year break from writing plays, and traveled to Russia so she could study Soviet life, art, and culture.

Childress expanded her writing abilities from plays to novels. She wrote three children's novels, *A Hero Ain't Nothing but a Sandwich* (1973), *Rainbow Jordan* (1981), and *Those other People* (1989). These novels, "contained moving depictions of alienated and lonely teenagers faced with finding security, acceptance, and selfhood in social environs hostile to their development as emotionally whole individuals" (Jennings 82). She wrote these books to help isolated children feel that they have reason to feel optimistic, "since all human beings can be magnificent once they realize their full importance" (Betsko and Koenig, 65). In 1978, *A Hero Ain't Nothing but a Sandwich* was made into a film.

Between 1975 and 1987 she recommences writing plays. Within this period she wrote three addition plays. When the *Rattlesnake Sounds*, *Let's Hear It for the Queen*, and *Moms: A Praise Play for a Black Comedienne*. In 1987 she wrote an adult novel title *Those Other People*. This book is about a young man having to deal with his homosexuality and all the implications that are associated with it. The protagonist does not feel he has to proclaim his sexual identity after all; heterosexual individuals do not have to declare their preference. This novel concludes her writing career. Childress is faced with her own dilemmas that take precedence over her writing.

Her daughter, Jean, developed cancer and Childress nursed her until Jean's death in 1990. Four years later, Alice Childress died of cancer. Childress can best be described as a, "trailblazer for African-American women in drama, ahead of her more famous peer Lorraine Hansberry, for her creation of a catalog of leading characters" (*Women in World History* 682).

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