

Author Spotlight

With

Linda Trice



How did you become a writer?

I started writing when I was a child. Some of us formed a literary magazine in our after school program in Bedford Stuyvesant. I got a press pass and went to hear Leonard Bernstein conduct the New York Philharmonic. I went backstage after the concert and a weary Bernstein, upon learning of all the reporters who wanted to interview him, said he'd only talk to the reporter from *The New York Times*. Looking at me he said, "And the kid."

My mom's friend was so impressed by the article and others like it that she let me write her social column in the *Sag Harbor Express* for a summer. There was no byline and no photograph so no one knew I was only fifteen years old.

I used those credentials to get jobs with other magazines and newspapers and a Master of Fine Arts degree in Writing from Columbia University. At the time there were only two other universities in the United States who offered that degree.

I thought I wanted to write fiction for adults but I found a job writing Sunday school stories for children ages 5-8 (the same age that my daughter was). The stories were used by Sunday schools in the United Presbyterian churches throughout the world. But even better, I found something that I loved to do, writing for children.

Have you had any jobs other than writing?

I come from a family of educators. Both of my parents taught elementary school and most of my relatives are teachers. I taught elementary school in Connecticut, New York, and Washington, DC. I went back to school, got a PhD and taught writing and Black Studies at undergraduate and graduate schools. Occasionally I teach adults who want to learn how to write for children.



What was your inspiration for writing *Kenya's Word*?

One of my classmates at Columbia University was Walter Dean Myers. I told him of my discouragement at not being able to get a picture book published. He suggested I write a book about a girl whose homework is to bring in her favorite word. I thought it was the worst idea I'd ever heard of, but I only had one published book, while Walter had fifty (he has one hundred now), so I sat down and wrote the book.

I sent it to every publisher I could think of. None of them accepted it. A friend at a summer workshop given by *Highlights for Children* reminded me of Charlesbridge. I sent the manuscript to Yolanda Leroy, an executive editor, and then went on to other writing projects.

One day Elena Wright, the head editor in Charlesbridge's educational division, called me and asked, "Is *Kenya's Word* still available? We'd like to publish it." You know my answer. I sat in stunned silence for a long time after I hung up the phone.

My daughter is now grown and a director at Harlem Children's Zone, a non-profit organization that provides support for poverty-stricken children and families living in Harlem. She organized their first book fair—one thousand people attended. Walter Dean Myers and I sat next to each other signing our books. He looked at *Kenya's Word* and said, "It came out well," then he smiled. A big, happy smile.



Many people love *Kenya's Word* because of its salute to diversity. You were a Black Studies professor and you have a Ph.D. from the Center for Minority Studies. How have these experiences affected and informed your career as a writer?

Growing up in New York, a culturally diverse city, was a wonderful experience. I realized that people have the same hopes and desires. I raised my daughter in a community with a lot of Ethiopians and Puerto Ricans. People from Bangladesh and the Dominican Republic live in my neighborhood now. It has been said that there are more Irish in New York City than there are in Dublin and more Italians in New York than there are in Rome. New York is that kind of a city. Our only Black mayor, David Dinkins, said New York City is not a melting pot, but a beautiful mosaic.

I graduated from Howard University in Washington, DC, a historically black university that had a higher ratio of foreign students than any college in the United States. What an education that was! One of my best friends was a sharecropper's son who loved opera. I met men from India who wore turbans and some from India who did not. My roommate came from an upper-class Haitian family and was dating the grandson of the ambassador from Madagascar. When his grandparents went to meetings at the United Nations in New York he'd often throw a party at the embassy. There I met handsome young men from Senegal who bent over my hand and murmured in French, "enchante."

All of this reinforced my understanding that people are alike, no matter where they live or what their religion or economic status is. Whenever I do a reading of *Kenya's Word*, or give presentations at schools, churches, libraries, or community groups, adults often tell me that the characters remind them of people in their lives. Kids adore Kenya because no matter how much she messes up, she does not get discouraged. As one boy told me, "Everyone doesn't listen sometimes." That's so true of both adults as well as kids.

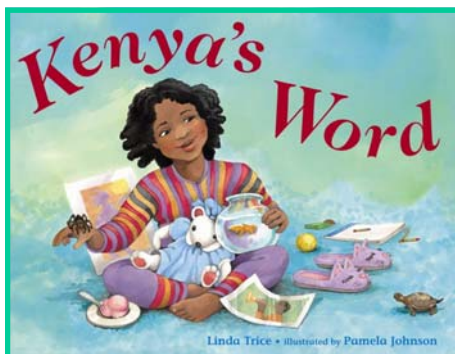
Your character Kenya has an unusual pet. Do you have any pets?

I can't remember a time when we didn't have pets! Like Kenya's family, we had a turtle and fish. We also had birds, hamsters, a guinea pig, and kittens. Mostly though we had dogs. Right now my sister has my parents' dog, Max, a fluffy little white poodle. He dislikes other dogs but adores people. They tell him how cute he is, then they pet him. He loves it.

My daughter has a puppy named Jack who is not fond of people but enjoys playing with other dogs. He was found abandoned in a shoe box in Kansas and taken to a shelter. It was thought he might be a pure bred Shiba Inu dog. A family in upstate New York became his foster family. They had two adult pit bulls who taught Jack all the things little dogs are supposed to know. My daughter adopted him when he was about six months old. We now know he is not a pure bred anything, but a mixture of many breeds. He has the distinctive wrinkled forehead of a Shiba Inu dog. When he looks at me it's like he is worried about something. So I have to give him a hug then I tell him that everything is OK and that he is loved, loved a lot.



Linda and Jack



ISBN 978-1-57091-887-2 HC \$16.95
ISBN 978-1-57091-888-9 PB \$6.95

Kenya can't seem to get anything right. When her teacher asks her to bring in the word that names her favorite animal, she brings in the animal itself - a live tarantula! What will happen when she is asked to choose her favorite describing word? Warm expressive illustrations show the cultural richness and diversity of Kenya's world.

"This book offers a nicely paced story of a girl who makes mistakes along the way, but applies herself and does well in the end." —*Booklist*