

With the Might of Angels

The Diary of Dawnie Rae Johnson,
Hadley, Virginia, 1954

BY ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY

Ages 8-14 • 304 pages

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SUMMARY

“School starts in four days. All’s I can think of is me at Prettyman Coburn. Me on that baseball field. Me inside a school with working clocks and toilets that flush. Me in a homeroom. Me with white kids. Only me,” writes Dawnie Rae Johnson in her “diary book.” It is September in Hadley, Virginia. The United States Supreme Court has recently banned school segregation, and Dawnie Rae has been selected to integrate Hadley’s only white school. Dawnie has dreamed of attending Prettyman ever since she and her best friend Yolanda took the long way home and saw the large clean building with its beautiful baseball field, “like something in a movie.” Dawnie even wished on her twelfth birthday that she could, one day, see the inside of Prettyman Coburn.

Now, though it seems Dawnie’s wish has come true, her dream has become more of a nightmare. She must face the opposition of the white townsfolk who don’t want her in “their” school, along with those in the black population who feel she should stay with her own kind and not stir up trouble. Even after uniformed policemen escort Dawnie into the school, through the angry protesters shouting racial insults at her, it is several days before the principal reluctantly admits her to her classes. Although her classmates taunt her and most of her teachers treat her as if she were invisible, Dawnie studies hard, motivated by her “Intention” to succeed, and she makes the honor roll.

But, outside of school, things get worse. Her father loses his job at the white dairy. Dawnie’s younger brother Goober is bullied and beaten up. Threatening phone calls come at all times of the day and night. Even some of the people at Dawnie’s church begin to think the Johnsons are “uppity” and “too good for the rest of us.”

TO THE DISCUSSION LEADER

The year is 1954. The Supreme Court has just ruled against segregation in public schools in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.

With the Might of Angels tells the story of the Johnson family. Dawnie’s parents know that their daughter is bright and dreams of becoming a doctor. They also know that dream won’t come true unless she has the advantages offered in the all-white school in town. With the support of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and members of her church, Dawnie tells her story of being the first and only black student in her school.

Author Andrea Davis Pinkney taps into her own personal experience as the first black student in an all-white school as she relates Dawnie’s story. Pinkney says, “When I went to school, I saw nobody else in the building who looked like me. I remember thinking, *I don’t like this*. Thankfully, I didn’t have to endure the terrible abuses Dawnie Rae suffered. My struggles came in more subtle forms, with kids wanting to touch my hair, and making “chocolate milk” jokes about the color of my skin. Fortunately, my teacher was a mighty angel, who did not tolerate any kind of prejudice. She made me feel welcome immediately, and reprimanded anyone who treated me or any other student badly.

In this fictional diary, real people from the period are mentioned: Martin Luther King, Jr., Claudette Colvin, Thurgood Marshall,

and baseball player Jackie Robinson. Readers see history unfold before them as they watch Dr. King’s belief in nonviolence play out as the black community successfully boycotts the local dairy for its stand against school integration. Dawnie Rae’s father loses his job in retaliation for sending his daughter to the all-white school. Threatening telephone calls in the evenings, teachers who refuse to acknowledge Dawnie’s presence in class, and attacks on Dawnie and her brother, Goober, all happen in an attempt to scare Dawnie from the school. But, with the might of angels, Dawnie holds fast to her goal of getting the best education possible.

With the Might of Angels is a portrait of a courageous girl who gathers the strength she needs from a loving and supportive family, the actions of her hero Jackie Robinson, a brave history teacher, and a wonderful Jewish friend named Gertie. Readers will finish the diary with a new and deeper understanding of this period in American history. They will also grapple with the question, Could I muster the strength and bravery to do what Dawnie Rae Johnson did?

SUMMARY—CONTINUED

Still, there are some bright spots. Dawnie's history teacher, Mr. Dunphey, who treats all students fairly, admires and encourages Dawnie. Miss Billie and Miss Cora, the lunchroom ladies, and Mr. Williams, the custodian, all let Dawnie know how proud they are of her. Happily, Dawnie makes a new friend when Gertie Feldman, a young Jewish girl from Brooklyn, New York, joins her class at Prettyman.

Reverend Collier, the pastor at the Johnsons' church, inspired by the message of Martin Luther King, Jr., rallies the black people to show their support for Dawnie and their community by peacefully boycotting the white dairy and refusing to accept any products that are delivered. The boycott is effective, and Dawnie's dad is offered his job back. But he refuses. Instead, he begins to help her mom with her successful laundry business.

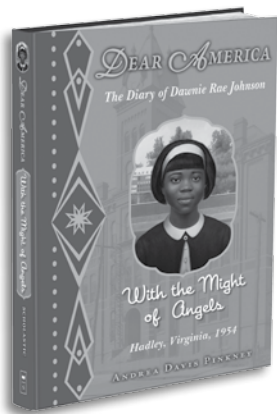
As the school year comes to a close, Dawnie's goal is to get the highest grade on the final exam, because that person will get to be the ringer of Prettyman Coburn's new bell for the next school year. She scores high on the exam, but not high enough. However, through the clever intervention of her friend Gertie, Dawnie gets the job. It's been a difficult and challenging year, but Dawnie has survived and succeeded. Goober's note in the new diary book he makes for her sums it up: "To Dawnie. My sister. You can fly."

THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK

1. What were the Jim Crow laws? How did the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* change those laws? What did "separate but equal" mean?
2. Who gives Dawnie her Diary Book? What does this tell you about how that person feels about Dawnie?
3. What do you admire most about Dawnie Rae Johnson?
4. Why was ringing the bell at Prettyman Coburn School so important to Dawnie?
5. Describe the Sutter's Dairy Boycott. Why did it happen? Was it successful?
6. Think of four different words you would use to describe Dawnie's father. What words did you choose? Why?
7. Why did Mr. Dunphey have to leave Prettyman Coburn School?
8. Dawnie and Gertie become best friends. What makes Gertie such a wonderful friend?
9. How did Dawnie finally become the bell ringer at Prettyman?

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. See what you can find out about baseball player Jackie Robinson. Why was he so important to Dawnie?
2. Identify the following:
 - a. Ruby Bridges
 - b. Claudette Colvin
 - c. Massive Resistance
 - d. The Little Rock Nine
 - e. Panic Monster
3. The author of Dawnie's diary is Andrea Davis Pinkney. When she started public school, she also was the only black student in her all-white elementary school. If you could ask her three questions about her experience, what would you ask?
4. For her homework, Dawnie had to read "The Three Questions," written by Leo Tolstoy. Then she had to answer these three questions:
 - a. What is the best time to do each thing?
 - b. Who are the most important people to work with?
 - c. What is the most important thing to do at all times?You can find the Tolstoy story at <http://www.online-literature.com/tolstoy/2736/>. Read it and decide how you would answer the three questions.
5. Read the book, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, by Robert Coles, about a real first grader who integrated a public school in New Orleans in 1960. How is Ruby's story similar to Dawnie's? How is it different?
6. One of the highlights of Dawnie's life occurred when young Martin Luther King, Jr. came to speak at her church. Recently a memorial in Washington, D.C. has been dedicated to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is the first memorial to an individual who was not a president of the United States or a military person. See photos of this memorial and learn more about it at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King,_Jr._National_Memorial.
7. Dawnie writes pretend letters to various important people and pastes them in her diary. If you could write a letter to a famous person living today, to whom would you write? What would you say to that person?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY is the author of more than twenty books for children and young adults, including the Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book *Let It Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters*; *Duke Ellington*, a Caldecott Honor and Coretta Scott King Honor Book; *Boycott Blues: How Rosa Parks Inspired a Nation*; and the *New York Times* bestseller *Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down*. She lives in New York City, where she also works as a children's book editor.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY

What inspired you to choose “With the Might of Angels” as the title of Dawnie’s diary? What is the origin of that phrase?

“With the might of angels” is a spiritual phrase. It means that each and every one of us is protected in some way. I immediately knew this would be the title for Dawnie’s story. Despite the many challenges Dawnie Rae faces, she always has the loving arms of her family, the support of her community, and friends who are rooting for her to succeed. I believe angels are always among us, disguised as people who care deeply about our well-being, and are here to guide us through troubling times.

Like Dawnie Rae, you were the only black student in your school. You’ve said that experience led to feelings of “anxious apartness.” Would you tell us more about that phenomenon?

I will never forget my first day of first grade, when my daddy walked me to an all-white school in my district. I was the only black student in Miss Lewis’s class, and I felt completely alone. This was more than a decade after schools became integrated, but many schools, because of their locations, were either predominately white or black.

When I went to school, I saw nobody else in the building who looked like me. I remember thinking, *I don’t like this.*

Thankfully, I didn’t have to endure the terrible abuses Dawnie Rae suffered. My struggles came in more subtle forms, with kids wanting to touch my hair, and making “chocolate milk” jokes about the color of my skin. Fortunately, my teacher was a mighty angel, who did not tolerate any kind of prejudice. She made me feel welcome immediately, and reprimanded anyone who treated me or any other student badly.

Growing up with parents who were both active in the civil rights movement, do you remember meeting any prominent figures in the movement, or do any certain events stand out in your mind from that time?

Mommy and Daddy were both active members of the NAACP and the National Urban League, two important civil rights organizations. Also, my dad was one of the first African American student interns in the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C., and later went on to work for the United States Department of Labor, where he advised several presidents on fair job practices for minorities. There were many nights when our home telephone rang, and the caller was a government official asking to speak to Daddy. What stands out most in my mind was spending summer vacations attending the NAACP

and National Urban League annual conferences. While other kids were at the beach or summer camp, I spent my summers listening to speeches about black pride!

All the way through Dawnie Rae’s diary, the reader tries to measure herself against Dawnie Rae and the courage she exhibits. The prevailing question becomes, What keeps Dawnie Rae going back to the school where she suffers so many indignities? Why does she do this? Where does she get her strength?

Dawnie Rae is whip-smart and brave—and she doesn’t shy-back for anybody. More than anything, Dawnie Rae wants to become a doctor when she grows up. The white school in her town has the facilities to help her reach this goal. There are new text books, advanced classes, and a science lab. Dawnie Rae endures so many torments because she knows that this all-white school has what she needs to make her dream come true. Each day, she summons strength from her own deep desire to succeed.

There are many things Dawnie Rae misses about her all-black school, though. She misses Negro History Week (the predecessor to Black History Month), when her teachers and fellow classmates paid tribute to the contributions of black Americans.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY—CONTINUED

And, she misses being in a school where everyone accepted her for who she was, and where she had lots of friends. Mostly, Dawnie Rae misses going to a school where everyone took pride in being black.

What was the most interesting or surprising detail that you discovered about life in Dawnie's time?

I love researching because it uncovers so many intriguing things. While I knew quite a bit about segregation and racial discrimination in the South, I didn't know that African Americans could not try on clothes or shoes when they went to purchase them in department stores! Or, if a store allowed a black customer to try on shoes, the store clerk had to put paper inside the shoes before an African American person could put the shoes on their feet. How humiliating! When I read about this, I kept thinking, *What message does this send to a child?*

Dawnie Rae's father is a wonderful character. Your own father, Philip J. Davis, was a civil rights activist. How did the memories of your dad influence your depiction of Dawnie's daddy?

Dawnie Rae's daddy is based on my own father, who was loving, strong, and had a great sense of humor. Daddy was deeply religious and committed to seeking progress for African Americans. He was the kindest dad ever, who instilled his beliefs for racial equality in me, my younger brother, P.J., and my sister, Lynne. Daddy believed that helping others is the greatest gift we give to the world. I agree.

If youngsters were interested in reading one or two other books about this period in American history and the people who influenced the times, what titles would you recommend?

I absolutely suggest the following books, which are among my favorites on the topic of civil rights:

Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice
by Phillip M. Hoose

A Wreath for Emmett Till
by Marilyn Nelson

Remember: The Journey to School Integration
by Toni Morrison

Marching for Freedom: Walk Together, Children, and Don't You Grow Weary
by Elizabeth Partridge

You have said, "There's something we call book magic, the exact moment in a book when a child becomes so engaged in a book that nothing can pull them away." Would you tell us some of the books that brought you that magic as a child?

My magical books—those that made me ignore my mom when she called me to dinner—were the books below:

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
by Maya Angelou

The Friends by Rosa Guy

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

The Contender by Robert Lipsyte

I still love these books today!

What is one question you'd like to ask children after they've finished reading Dawnie Rae's diary?

Now that you've read *With the Might of Angels*, what will you do when you see someone who is different, or an outcast, and who is the brunt of jokes and ridicule? Will you welcome them into your circle? Will you stick up for them? Will you be an angel coming to that person in the form of a friend?

Discussion Guide written by Richard F. Abrahamson, Ph.D., Professor of Literature for Children and Young Adults, University of Houston and Eleanore S. Tyson, Ed.D., Clinical Professor, University of Houston, Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Houston, Texas.

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