

# 1 notes

- BlackPast
  - Born as Alice Herndon, 1916, in Charleston, SC
  - Parents separated in 1925
  - moved to grandmothers home of Harlem, NYC who encouraged her to write and explore the arts
  - quit highschool 2 years in, worked low paying jobs while becoming involved in theatre scene
  - In the 1930's, she both married and divorced Alvin Childress, who was the father to her daughter, Jean R. Childress
  - She later married musician Nathan Woodard in 1957
  - Joined Harlem's American Negro Theatre (ANT) where she worked as an actress, stage director, personnel director, and costume designer for 11 years
  - While at ANT she fought for off-broadway union contracts that would assure advanced pay for actors.
  - As an actress, she appeared in many New York productions, including *Natural Man* (1941), *Rain* (1948), and *The Emperor's Clothes* (1943)
  - *Anna Lucasta* (1944) transferred to Broadway garnering Childress a Tony nomination
  - Wrote her first play *Florence* in 1949, which reflects many themes characterized in Childress's later writings such as black female empowerment, interracial politics, working-class life and attacks on black stereotypes
  - with the off-Broadway performances of *Just a Little Simple* (1950) and *Gold through the Trees* (1952), Childress became the first professionally produced black female playwright
  - at the end of the '55-'56 off-Broadway season, Childress's *Trouble in Mind* won an Obie Award for Best Original Play, making Childress the first black woman to be awarded the honor, by the end of her career she had written over a dozen plays

- One of her most famous works, *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* (1973), discusses difficult social issues such as racism, drug use, teen pregnancy, and homosexuality, this novel helped launch her career as a young adult novelist
  - the novel was adapted into a screenplay in 1978 with Childress writing two other young adult novels, an adult novel, and a collection of short stories
  - Several of her works caused controversy, with some networks refusing to televise the 1969 production of *Wine in the Wilderness* and the 1973 production of *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*. On top of that many school districts and libraries banned *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich*
  - Childress received many awards and grants such as: a Rockefeller grant, a graduate medal from the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study, the Radcliffe Alumnae Graduate Society Medal for Distinguished Achievement, and a Lifetime Career Achievement Award from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education
- Roundabout Theatre Company
    - as a child, Childress spent hours at the public library
    - Her Grandmother, Eliza White, enjoyed telling stories and encouraged this talent in her granddaughter, together they would make up stories about people they watched from their window
    - she did not attend complete high school or attend college, she was entirely self-educated, thanks to her grandmother's influence and her own passion for learning.
    - As a teenager, she saw a Shakespeare play that sparked her interest in theatre.
    - her first mentor was Venezuela Jones, who ran the Federal Theatre Project's Negro Youth Theatre and was the first Black woman playwright Childress met.
    - W.E.B. Du Bois, Founder of The NAACP and a leading black scholar also inspired Childress, particularly her interest in Africa.
    - His wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois encouraged Childress to write

- ANT paid little to no money so Childress worked a variety of low-paying jobs outside of Theatre
- Her first play *Florence* was written overnight for ANT, which she later left to focus on playwrighting
- Outside of writing plays, Childress also engaged in real-world political activism.
- She worked with the Committee for the Negro in the Arts (CNA), as well as fighting for theatre artists' rights to receive advances and guaranteed pay for union actors in Off-Broadway productions.
- She also wrote a column in the progressive Black newspaper *Freedom* using the persona "Mildred," a domestic worker who shared her experiences of racism
- she also taught classes at the Jefferson School of Social Science, a Marxist institute for adult Education
- She and Shirley Graham Du Bois founded Sojourners for Truth and Justice, which was a radical Black women's civil rights group that fought against lynching, the rape of Black Women by white men, Jim Crow, South African apartheid, and sexism.
- Her association with these left-wing organizations put her on the FBI's surveillance list for many years, however, she was eventually cleared of any association with the Communist Party
- Her book *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* (1973) which explored the struggle of Black youth in the inner city, received many awards, such as, The American Library Association's Best Young Adult Book, the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award and a Jane Addams Award
- She also received many academic awards later in life. Radcliffe College, where she had been an Associate Scholar from 1966 to 1968, awarded her an Alumnae Graduate Society Medal for Distinguished Achievement in 1984
- She received an Honorary Degree from the State University of New York at Oneonta and an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from State University of New York, both in 1990. On top of this, she received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association for Theatre of Higher Education in 1993.

## 2 script

- Alice Childress, was born in 1916 as Alice Herndon in Charleston, South Carolina
- When she was 9 her parents separated and she went to live with her grandmother, Eliza White, in Harlem, New York
- Eliza was interested in storytelling and passed this interest to her granddaughter, and together they would make up stories about the people they watched from their window.
- As a teenager Alice saw a Shakespeare play that instilled a passion for theatre in her
- Childress did not finish High School or attend college, she was entirely self educated thanks to her grandmother's influence and her own passion for learning.
- Her first mentor was Venezuela Jones, who ran the Federal Theatre Project's Negro Youth Theatre and was the First Black female playwright that Childress had met
- Another early influence for her was W.E.B. Du Bois, the founder of the NAACP and a leading black scholar, and his wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois, with the couple particularly inspiring her interest in Africa and encouraging her to write, respectively
- She eventually joined Harlem's American Negro Theatre, or ANT, where she worked as an actress, stage manager, director, and designer, among other things, for 11 years.
- During this time she was seen in many New York productions, such as Natural Man in 1941, the Emperor's Clothes in 1943 and Rain in 1948. She also appeared in the play Anna Lucasta in 1944 which garnered her a Tony Nomination when it transferred to Broadway.
- Even though she was doing shows at ANT, the pay was meager or, at times, non-existent, so Childress took many low-paying jobs outside of theatre to support her family.

- Moving on to her playwriting, In 1949 she wrote her first play *Florence*, which tackled issues relating to black female empowerment, interracial politics, working class life, and attacks on black stereotypes, overnight for ANT, however she would later leave ANT to focus on playwriting.
- The next few years saw the off-broadway performances of her plays *Just a little simple* and *gold through the tress* in 1950 and 1952 respectively. This made Childress the first professionally produced black female playwright.
- On top of this, in the 1955 to 56 Off-broadway season, Childress's *Trouble in mind* won an Obie Award for Best Original Play, making her the first black woman to earn such an award
- Outside of playwriting, Childress was also quite politically active.
- she worked with the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, fought for theatre artists' rights to receive advances and guaranteed pay for union actors in off-broadway productions
- she also wrote a column for the progressive black newspaper, *Freedom*, using the persona of Mildred, a domestic worker who shared her experiences with racism. on top of this, she also taught classes at the Jefferson School of Social Sciences, a Marxist institute for adult education
- She concurrently founded Sojourners for Truth and Justice, a organization that fought against lynching, the rape of Black Women by white men, Jim Crow, South African Apartheid, and sexism, with Shirley Graham Du Bois.
- Due to her association with these left-wing association, Childress was put on the FBI's surveillance list but was eventually cleared of any connection with the Communist particularly
- In addition to her playwriting, Childress was also an acclaimed author, with her 1973 book *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, which explored the struggle of Black youth in the inner city, receiving many awards such as The American Library Association's Best Young Adult Book, The Lewis Carol Shelf Award, and a Jane Addams Award.

- While it did receive many awards, it also stirred some controversy, with many school districts and libraries banning it.
- *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* kicked off Childress's novel career, with her going on to write two other young adult novels, an adult novel, and a collection of short stories
- Alice received many academic awards in her time as well, receiving an Alumnae Graduate Society Medal for Distinguished Achievement in 1984 from Radcliffe College where she was an Associate Scholar from 1966 to 1968.
- she also received an Honorary Degree from the State University of New York at Oneonta and a Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from the State University of New York, both in 1990, on top of this, she received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education in 1993

## Works Cited

- Granshaw, Michelle. "Alice Childress (1916-1994)". *BlackPast*, [www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/childress-alice-1916-1994/](http://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/childress-alice-1916-1994/).
- Roundabout Theatre Company. "The Life And Works of Alice Childress: Trouble In Mind". [www.roundabouttheatre.org/get-tickets/upstage-guides-current/upstage-guide-trouble-in-mind/life-work-alice-childress-trouble-in-mind/](http://www.roundabouttheatre.org/get-tickets/upstage-guides-current/upstage-guide-trouble-in-mind/life-work-alice-childress-trouble-in-mind/).