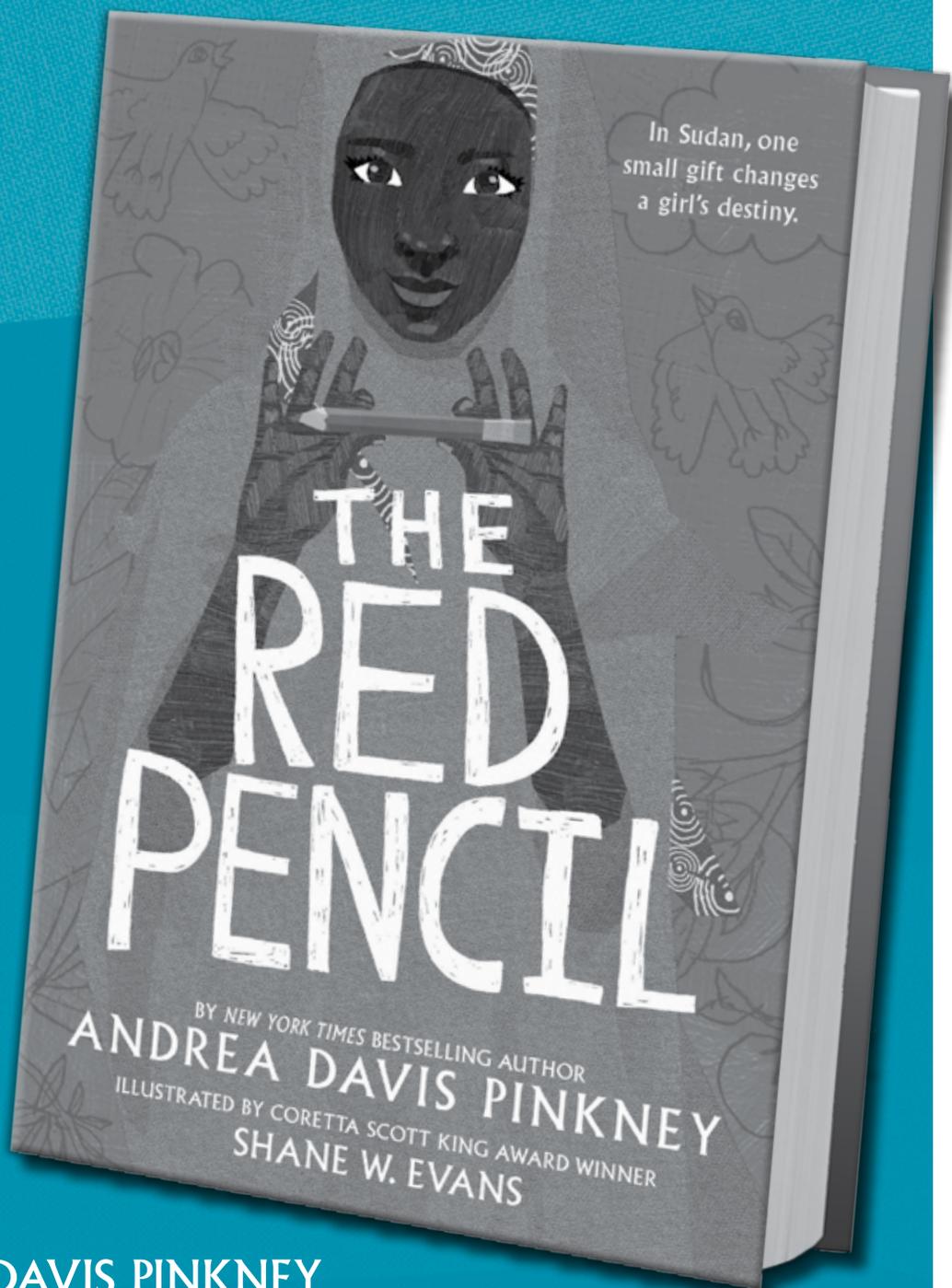


# THE RED PENCIL

## Curriculum connections

- ❖ Social Studies
- ❖ Poetry

Ages: 9 & Up



BY ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY  
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**POINTS TO PONDER** Discussion as a learning strategy affords students and teachers a forum for exploration of ideas that is facilitated through open-ended and directed questions. Students have opportunities to express opinions, learn from others, engage in self-reflection, and interpret literature. The following questions serve as a guide to stimulate thought and encourage discourse about the novel.

### Part One

Amira's birthday is an important family occasion. What is so special about her twelfth birthday? What do her parents, Dando and Muma, say about her birthday? What do their words tell you about Amira?

Amira's best friend Halima and her family leave the village and move to Nyala, a bustling city. Halima's father is searching for opportunity. What does he expect to find in the city? Why do you think Amira's family is not moving to the city?

Amira says that her friend's parents are modern people not stifled by tradition. What are differences between the modern and traditional Sudanese ways of life? Which does Amira prefer? Why?

Dando uses words like persecution, rebellion and genocide to describe war. Muma uses words like armed, militia, bandits, and renegades to describe the Janjaweed. How are these words alike and different?

The moon appears throughout the story as a greatly influential symbol. Explain why Sayidda Moon is such an important force in Amira's village. What is the tradition of waking the moon?

On the night that Leila, Amira's sister, was born, how did the family know that she would be "different"? How did the family react when they saw her? Why do you think they reacted that way?

Despite a loving relationship, Amira and her mother clash in an ongoing difference of opinion. What subject do they disagree on? Why do you think Amira's mother feels the way she does? Why does Amira feel the opposite?

A significant part of Sudanese life and culture is *goz*. What does Amira mean when she refers to *goz* as Darfur's great blanket? Why does she have such deep reverence for it?

Amira describes the way that she draws in the following manner: "My hand and my twig and my sparrow do the dance on the sand." Why does she use these words? What does sparrow mean in this context? What words would you use to describe drawing?

Dando and Amira share a game called "What Else Is Possible?" Why is it a favorite game for both of them? How do you think they feel when they play the game?

Old Anwar and Dando agree that Amira should learn to read. However, they face the objection of Amira's mother. What arguments would you offer to persuade her to agree with them?

Amira notices "a strange shadow in people's eyes." How does she respond when she looks at the faces of the villagers? What is meant by "eyes tell what is inside"?

In the wake of a horrific raid by the Janjaweed, the villagers must flee the safety and security of their homes. Describe their experiences during the journey to Kalma in terms of their emotional states and physical challenges.

### Part Two

The refugees finally arrive at Kalma. What are Amira's impressions of her new home? How do they compare to the farm life she left behind?

Amira, her mother, Leila, and Gamal are greatly affected by the outcome of the raid. How does each cope with grief in the aftermath? How do their behaviors change?

Amira has never seen a television before. What role does the "flicker box" play in the story? How does Amira react to it? What new meaning does it have for her when she likens it to the displacement camp?

Miss Sabine from Sudan Relief visits Kalma to give the children pencils and paper. With all hands outstretched to receive the gifts, she makes a gift to Amira. Why do

you think she gave the red pencil to Amira? How does Amira compare it to the twig she had in the village?

When Amira shows her red pencil to Old Anwar, he responds, “It suits you...Such a bold color. Strong.” After she shares her drawings, he looks closely and says, “Healing.” What is the message he is conveying to her?

Amira wants to learn to read very much. Old Anwar offers to teach Amira to read in secret at night by lantern and not tell Muma. Do you think that this is a good idea? Why or why not? How do you think Muma will react when she learns of this plan?

Amira is grateful to Old Anwar for teaching her to read, but her wish is to “have lessons in a real school with other girls, with Halima.” Knowing that the family has

no money to send her to school, she shares her feelings anyway. Should she have told Old Anwar about her wish? Why or why not?

There were no hedgehogs on Amira’s village farm. Why is she so fascinated with this unfamiliar creature? Why does she tell Sayidda Moon that her big wish is to be “a hedgehog, slipping off to school”?

Amira has made her decision. She is leaving to go to Nyala to attend the Gad School. However, she has “itchy doubt.” Why do you believe she is so apprehensive? How does she manage and overcome these feelings?

The last verse of the story is titled “Flight.” How does this word reflect the essence of the story? What other word could you use to describe a culminating theme?

**BEYOND THE STORYLINE** Comprehension is the ability of the mind to perceive and understand. Reading comprehension is the capacity to perceive and understand the meanings communicated by texts. It is an intentional engagement with a text that occurs before, during, and after reading. The following activities are designed to expand comprehension and broaden the literary experience.

**New Knowledge**

This exercise focuses on making predictions. Share a brief plot summary of pages 1-23 to inform students about the story. Lead a discussion, asking them what they know about the subject and about any connections they can make to the story. Have students study illustrations and bold headings on pages 1-23. Ask them to predict what they may learn. Use the modified KWL (know/want-to-know/learned) chart to help students organize their thoughts. (See chart below.) After students finish the novel, lead a discussion about their predictions. What information or cues led to the predictions? Were they accurate? Why or why not? Have students share what they learned and what other new knowledge they want to pursue.

**Interesting Imagery**

Model this strategy on visualization for students by reading the passage “Rubber Twigs,” pages 150-151. Describe pictures in your mind. Talk about the words that stimulated the images and ideas. Have students read the following passages and visualize them while they are reading:

- “School,” pages 11-13
- “War,” pages 20-21
- “Vanishing,” pages 146-147
- “We,” pages 305-306

Follow up with discussion, asking students to describe the images and explain how they helped their understanding of the story.

KNOW	WANT TO KNOW	LEARNED	WANT TO RESEARCH

### Wonderful Wording

This activity in vocabulary development helps students understand key words and expand their repertoires. It also aids in fostering contextual meaning. Have students create a vocabulary journal to learn new words. Divide a notebook page into three columns and label them accordingly: “Word in Context,” “Definition in My Own Words,” and “A Similar Meaning” (Synonym). Place the following words and page numbers from the novel in the first column:

Displaced, page 138  
 Opportunity, pages 9, 15  
 Possibility, page 62  
 Abundance, pages 3, 229  
 Obstinate, page 91, 101  
 Chaos, page 110  
 Admonished, page 262  
 Superstition, page 133  
 Ration, page 122

Have students read the words in context, then look up the word in a dictionary and write their own definitions in the second column. Identify synonyms and list them in the third column. In class discussion, have students share their definitions and new vocabulary.

### Mapping Matters

The use of semantic organizers is an efficient approach to help students organize and remember information. Assign students to small groups and one of the three following themes: *Culture*, *Conviction*, and *Conflict*. Have students brainstorm ideas and vocabulary related to the topic found in the novel. In a discussion, have the groups compare their maps for differences and similarities. The map has no boundaries; subtopics can be expanded with additional topics. (see diagram on the right)

### Lively Language

Andrea Davis Pinkney enriches the story by using figurative *language* to stimulate the reader’s imagination. Discuss the differences between metaphors and similes with students. In groups, have them discuss the following examples from the text by asking them to “translate” the phrase. What are the words describing? How does the “translation” bring meaning to the story? Have them write and share similes and metaphors based on ideas in the story.

Its golden braids are woven with the promise of a hearty harvest (2).

Words flap from her like giddy chickens escaping their pen (10).

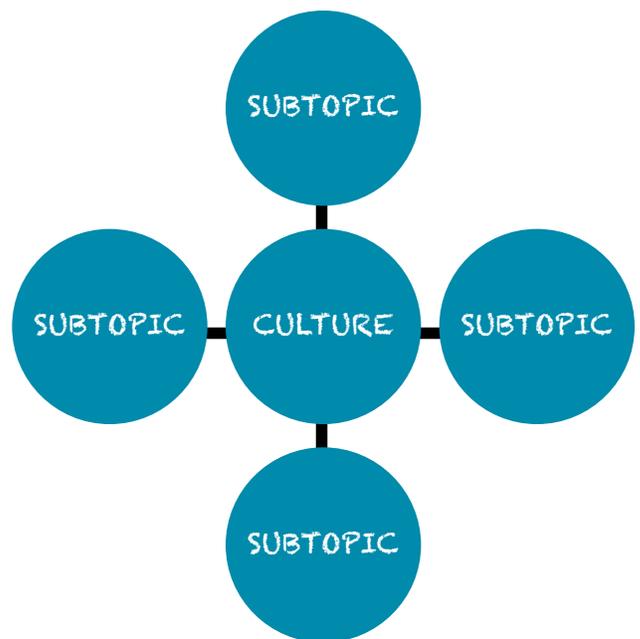
He smiles as wide as a moon’s crescent (26).

The sun, she has a blistering palm (27).

Muma is shriveling, like a dried-up hibiscus flower page (204).

A lighted ball flaunting plump abundance, high in a so-black sky (272).

Words leap from me like a grasshopper from a folded palm (260).



**Personality Plus**

A sub-genre of realistic fiction, the coming-of-age story is a viable approach to studying the literary element of character. Introduce the students to the concept asking them to think about its meaning. To help them gain insight into the protagonist, ask students to create a timeline of milestones in Amira’s life. For each entry, discuss how it reflects growth and maturity. Examples to note include feelings, events, problems, habits, traditions, behaviors, etc. Have students share their timelines and cite the most influential changes she undergoes.

**Reasonable Responses**

Students use double-entry journals (*See chart below.*) to record responses to text as they read. This writing strategy helps improve comprehension and allows the student to express thoughts about the story using a two-column template. Have the students use the left side to record meaningful or interesting quotes from the book. On the right side, they are to record their reactions, including opinions, comments, questions, analysis, relations to personal experiences, interpretations, relationships to theme or content, literary elements, etc. Have students share their responses to enrich discussion about the story.

DOUBLE-ENTRY JOURNAL	
Quotes from the Text	My Thoughts and Reactions

**CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS** Interdisciplinary teaching links literary works to enhance readers’ experiences by substantiating relevance and contributing to student success through inclusive learning. It helps students form connections and retain knowledge.

**Social Studies**

Have students create a collective profile of Sudan.

Assign small groups to research the following topics:

- Geography, including the capital, maps, and largest cities
- Ethnicities
- History
- Government
- Language
- Religion
- Education
- Economy

- Lifestyle, including family structure and gender roles
- Recreation

Have the groups make oral presentations using technology and visual aids.

**Science**

Read the passage about the *haboob*, pages 86-97. Have students independently investigate other meteorological phenomena. Have them share their reports with the class. In a writing assignment, have students select a condition and assume the role of a meteorologist who is on the scene reporting a developing weather condition in detail. Record their reports for class discussion.

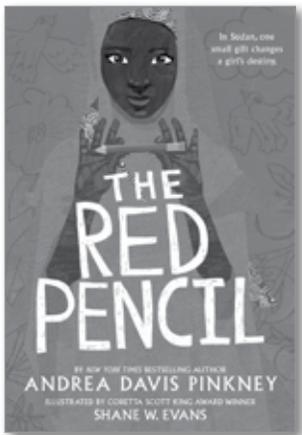
**Math**

Dando teaches Amira reading and arithmetic. She loves reading, but professes, “Arithmetic is not for me.”, (229). Dando uses a simple technique to teach addition with an onion and a stone. Have students read the passage and think of ways to teach mathematics to someone like Amira who is also just learning math. Have students demonstrate their techniques to the class.

**Art**

Andrea Davis Pinkney describes Amira’s drawings of family using illuminating and expressive words. For example, “Muma: strong face, elongated, so oval.” Read passages on pages 78-81 and pages 250-251. In pairs, have students create drawings and descriptions of each other. Collect the portraits and have students guess the subject’s identities, discussing accuracy of the portrayals.

about the book

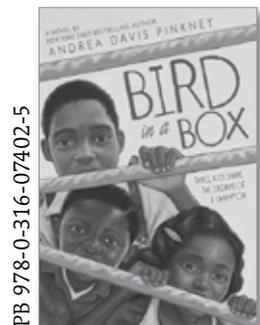


**THE RED PENCIL**  
by Andrea Davis Pinkney  
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ebook and audio formats

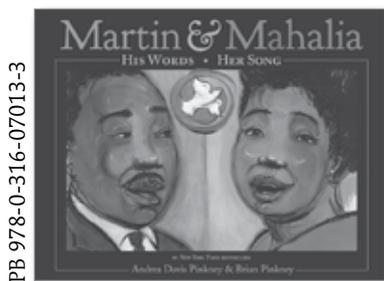
Finally, Amira is twelve. Old enough to wear a toob, old enough for new responsibilities. And maybe old enough to go to school in Nyala – Amira’s one true dream.

But life in her peaceful Sudanese village is shattered when the Janjaweed arrive. The terrifying attackers ravage the town and unleash unspeakable horrors. After she loses nearly everything, Amira needs to dig deep within herself and find the strength to make the long journey – on foot – to safety at a refugee camp. Her days are tough at the camp, until the gift of a simple red pencil opens her mind – and all kinds of possibilities.

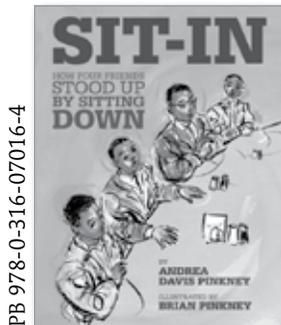
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about the author



Andrea Davis Pinkney is the *New York Times* bestselling and award-winning author of more than 20 books for children, including *Bird in a Box* and several collaborations with her husband Brian Pinkney, including *Sit In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down*, *Hand in Hand: Ten Black Men Who Changed America*, and *Martin & Mahalia: His Words, Her Song*. She lives with her family in Brooklyn, NY.

about the illustrator



Shane W. Evans is the illustrator of many books for young readers, including *Underground: Finding the Light to Freedom*, which won the Coretta Scott King Award, and *Nobody Gonna Turn Me ‘Round*, which was nominated for an NAACP Image Award. Visit him online at [www.ShaneEvans.com](http://www.ShaneEvans.com).

