

Words from the Author

Schroeder, Alan. *In Her Hands: The Story of Sculptor Augusta Savage*. New York: Lee & Low Books, 2009.

Alan Schroeder

I came upon her by accident.

I was researching the life of African- and Native-American artist Edmonia Lewis, thinking I might be able to work up her story into a picture book, when I stumbled across an article about another African-American artist, Augusta Savage. Her name was not familiar to me, but as I read about her life and especially her difficulties, I began to see all sorts of dramatic possibilities.

Savage grew up in Florida in the 1890s and began to sculpt at an early age. Her father, a preacher, was a negative influence in her life; he believed that secular art was sinful, and he did everything he could to discourage his daughter's artistic ability. His methods included corporal punishment. "My father licked me five or six times a week and almost whipped all the art out of me," Augusta said. "Almost," of course, is the key word here. In the end, Augusta's will was triumphant, and in 1921 she went to New York City, where she was accepted into an art school and, in time, distinguished herself as a gifted sculptor.

I had my subject; now I needed to find its proper form. I tried at first to write a cradle-to-grave biography, but was unhappy with the result. Years earlier I had tried the same approach with dancer Josephine Baker for my book *Ragtime Tumpie*, with equally poor results. For *Tumpie*, I decided to concentrate on Josephine's early years—on her family's poverty, her stepfather's negativity, and her burning desire to become a dancer—and that tight-focus approach seemed to work. I decided to apply the same treatment to Augusta Savage's story.

Obviously, no two people's lives are identical. Josephine's moment of triumph came at the age of nine, when she entered and won a dancing contest in her neighborhood. But Augusta's "victory" occurred at a later age; she was twenty-seven years old when she won the prize money that enabled her to go to New York to study art.

Twenty-seven? That seemed to me a rather advanced age for the heroine of a picture book. Would children be able to relate to her, and would they have the patience to follow her lengthy struggle? And even if I were able to tell her story in a compelling way, was there an audience for this book? Augusta Savage destroyed much of her artwork, and she is not well-remembered today. Would any child—or any adult, for that matter—want to read a book because it was about Augusta Savage? Probably not. But I believed that

Augusta's struggle was universal. We have all been told at some point that our dreams are impractical, or that they will not come true. At such moments we have to rely on our inner strength to carry us forward. We have to believe that our dream *is* worthwhile and that we *can* make it happen.

This was the position in which Augusta found herself. Fortunately, she listened to her own voice, and not her father's, and after a good many years, she was able to realize her childhood ambition of becoming a sculptor. Her self-determination, I felt, was what made her story universal, and it would be for that reason, and no other, that a child would want to pick up *In Her Hands*.

Books, of course, are a collaborative effort, and I was fortunate to work with a wonderful editor. Jennifer Fox at Lee & Low read the manuscript with a sensitive eye, and her suggestions for changes were nearly always for the better. Only once or twice did we disagree. One disagreement had to do with structure. The story opened with a confrontation between Augusta and her father:

"What's you doin' there, girl?"

Augusta held up her hands, sticky with clay. "Playin'. Makin' stuff."

"Playin'?" Edward shook his head. "You ought to be reading the Bible instead," he told her, "cultivating your mind, saving your soul."

"I don't want to read the Bible," Augusta said stubbornly.

Edward grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her to her feet. "Don't you never talk back to me!" he said.

The scene that followed was set in church. Augusta waits impatiently for her father's sermon to end so she can hurry home to the clay pit behind her house. Jennifer, my editor, thought the scenes should be reversed, opening with the church scene. She was afraid that young readers might not like the first scene to be overly confrontational—that they would be put off by it. I considered her suggestion, but I preferred the original structure. To me, it felt more balanced; it also enabled me to move effortlessly into the third scene, and a smooth transition, I have learned, is a valuable commodity. In the end, Jennifer let me have my way (though we did have to trim the father/daughter argument for purposes of length).

The other disagreement we had was not so easily resolved. I had titled the book *Lift Every Voice: The Story of Sculptor Augusta Savage*. Jennifer questioned my choice. Readers, she pointed out, might think that it was a story about a singer. And so began our lengthy search for a new title. Ask any author: good titles are not easy to discover. I made several suggestions, all of them quite bad. Jennifer was patient; she assured me that we would come up with the right one. In the end, it was Jennifer who suggested *In Her Hands*, a phrase that occurs several times in the text. At last, we had a workable title.

The book came out in the fall of 2009, and the reviews were uniformly positive. It has not, as far as I can tell, led to any resurgence of interest in Augusta's life or art. But that

was not the reason I wrote the book. Like many of my titles—*Ragtime Tumpie*, *Satchmo's Blues*, *Minty*—the story is not so much biographical as inspirational. I am attracted to stories about real-life children who manage to achieve a dream in spite of personal difficulties. I want my readers to say to themselves, "If he (or she) could do it, then maybe I can do it, too."

But hoping and dreaming are not enough. Hard work, persistent work, is required in order to achieve one's goals, and this is a message that I try to get across, both in my books and in my visits to schools across the country. Take nothing for granted, work hard, listen to your inner voice, keep alive that flame within you, for sooner or later it will lead you to your goal. If that message comes through in *In Her Hands*, then I feel that, as a writer, I have succeeded.

Work Cited

Bearden, Romare, and Harry Henderson. *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.

About the Author

Alan Schroeder's books—which include *Ragtime Tumpie*, *Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman*, *Carolina Shout!*, and *Satchmo's Blues*—have earned numerous honors such as ALA Notables, Parents' Choice Awards, the Christopher Award, and the Coretta Scott King Award for Illustration. Schroeder, who lives in Alameda, California, is presently working on a book about Ansel Adams's early years.