

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Cheryl Willis Hudson

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Hudson, Cheryl Willis
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Willis Hudson,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 28, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:26:08).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Fiction writer Cheryl Willis Hudson (1948 - ) published children's books. Hudson was the co-founder of Just Us Books, Inc. and the developer of AFRO-BETS kids. She was the publisher of Bright Eyes, Brown Skin, Good Morning Baby, Good Night Baby and Ziggy and the Black Dinosaurs. Hudson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 28, 2007, in East Orange, New Jersey. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_174
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Children's book publisher and author Cheryl Willis Hudson was born on April 7, 1948 in Portsmouth, Virginia to Hayes Elijah Willis, III, an insurance executive, and Lillian Watson Willis, an educator. Hudson attended Oberlin College and graduated cum laude in 1970. The following summer, she enrolled in a summer publishing procedures course at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In the fall of 1970, Hudson began working as an art editor in the educational division of Houghton Mifflin in Boston. She and Wade Hudson, a writer, met in

Cambridge in 1971 and began collaborating on children's book ideas. In 1972, she and Hudson were married, and they subsequently moved to New Jersey to live while Wade was enrolled in Channel 13's film and television training program in New York City. Cheryl continued her career as a graphic designer at Macmillan Publishing Company in New York City and at Arete Publishing in Princeton, New Jersey.

In 1976 the Hudsons first child, Katura, was born and after failing to obtain African American art to ornament her nursery's walls, Hudson decided to create her own designs. Ultimately, she was inspired to create a children's book, and although she and Hudson attempted to shop it around to various publishing companies, they were unsuccessful. In 1982, Hudson again gave birth to the couple's second child, Stephan J. Hudson, and three years later, the couple again revived their idea of creating African American children's art.

In 1985, the Hudsons developed the AFRO-BETS kids, black characters who would twist themselves into the shape of the alphabet. Two years later, after further rejections from various publishers, they invested \$7,000 and self-published it. The couple received attention from leading education magazines and black bookstores, which carried the books. After the AFRO-BETS books sold out within three months, the Hudsons founded Just Us Books, Inc., an independent publishing company that publishes books and educational material for children that focus on black history, experiences and culture.

Cheryl Hudson handled the editorial aspects, while her husband served as president of the company, managing the business and marketing aspects. As director of editorial operations she works with authors and artists, and has helped many young aspiring book creators get their start in the publishing industry.

In 1990, Just Us Books, Inc. introduced a bi-monthly newspaper for young people entitled *Harambee*, which would later win a parent's choice award. Throughout the 1990s, Just Us Books continued to publish critically acclaimed children's literature, including *Bright Eyes*, *Brown Skin*, *Jamal's Busy Day*, *Annie's Gifts*, *When I Was Little*, *Ziggy and the Black Dinosaurs* and *Kid Caramel*, the first contemporary mystery series to focus on young, black male characters. In 1997, *Income Opportunities Magazine* named the Hudsons "Small Business Pioneers of the Year." In 2004, they began the Sankofa Books imprint, which publishes Black classics for children and young adults that are no longer in print.

Hudson is an award-winning author of more than twenty books for children. They include *Bright Eyes*, *Brown Skin*, *Hands Can*, the *What A Baby* series, *Many Colors of Mother Goose*, *Come By Here, Lord*, *Everyday Prayers for Children* and

*Langston's Legacy*. A graphic artist, Hudson has designed a number of books published by Just Us Books.

When she's not writing, editing or art directing children's books, Hudson is active in her community and publishing industry organizations. She serves on the advisory boards of the Small Press Center and the Langston Hughes Library at the Alex Haley Farm, operated by the Children's Defense Fund. She is also a member of the Author's Guild, PEN America and the Society of Book Writers and Illustrators. Among her accolades are the Stephen Crane Award and induction into the International Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent in 2003. Hudson also serves as a diversity and parenting expert for ClubMom.com.

Hudson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 28, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Cheryl Willis Hudson was conducted by Shawn Wilson on April 28, 2007, in East Orange, New Jersey, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fiction writer Cheryl Willis Hudson (1948 - ) published children's books. Hudson was the co-founder of Just Us Books, Inc. and the developer of AFRO-BETS kids. She was the publisher of Bright Eyes, Brown Skin, Good Morning Baby, Good Night Baby and Ziggy and the Black Dinosaurs.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## **Controlled Access Terms**

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### **Persons:**

Hudson, Cheryl Willis

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghilea, Neculai (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Hudson, Cheryl Willis--Interviews

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### **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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### **Occupations:**

Fiction Writer

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### **HistoryMakers® Category:**

## **Administrative Information**

### **Custodial History**

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### **Preferred Citation**

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Willis Hudson, April 28, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### **Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## **Other Finding Aid**

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## **Detailed Description of the Collection**

### **Series I: Original Interview Footage**

Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Willis Hudson, Section  
A2007\_174\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:11 2007/04/28

Cheryl Willis Hudson was born on April 7, 1948 in

Portsmouth, Virginia to Lillian Watson Willis and Hayes Willis III. Her maternal relatives were comprised of the Watson and Carter families, as her grandparents' siblings also married. They lived in Charlottesville, Virginia, where most of Hudson's relatives worked on the railroad or as domestics. One of Hudson's maternal great-grandfathers, Jon Carter, Jr., was a hotel chef in Charlottesville, while the other, Allen Watson, was a carpenter. Hudson's maternal grandfather, Louis Watson, fought in World War I. Her mother graduated early; and, from the age of fourteen years old, studied to become a teacher at the Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia. Hudson's father served in World War II, and worked as an insurance agent at the Virginia Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company. Her parents met in Charlottesville, and settled in Portsmouth, where Hudson played in the empty coal houses during the summer, and watched the ships come in at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard.

Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Willis Hudson, Section A2007\_174\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:35 2007/04/28

Cheryl Willis Hudson grew up in the Douglas Park neighborhood of Portsmouth, Virginia, where her family was socially active in the community, and belonged to the Zion Baptist Church. Living in a segregated town, Hudson had little interaction with Portsmouth's white residents, as most African Americans lived within their own self-sustaining communities. Because Virginia schools and libraries were not integrated until the 1960s, Hudson attended the all-black Mount Hermon Elementary School. Her parents encouraged her cultural education by enrolling her in piano and ballet lessons, and reading her poetry. Although the arts were emphasized during her childhood, Hudson became interested in science in junior high school during the space race. At I.C. Norcom High School, she took accelerated classes, and participated in state-wide science fairs. During the summers, she attended science programs at Howard University in Washington, D.C. and Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire.

Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Willis Hudson, Section A2007\_174\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:45 2007/04/28

Cheryl Willis Hudson experienced integrated education

for the first time at a summer program at Phillips Exeter Academy, just after her high school graduation in 1966. She then attended Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, where she switched her major from science to sociology after struggling in a chemistry class. She decided to pursue a career in publishing, which combined her passions of drawing and reading. While in college, Hudson was involved in the Civil Rights Movement. She met Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. while working for Carl Stokes' mayoral campaign in Cleveland, Ohio, and helped the activities that led to the founding of the African American studies department at Oberlin College. Hudson graduated in 1970, and enrolled in classes at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she met her husband, Wade Hudson. Upon graduation, Hudson was hired as an art editor at the Houghton Mifflin Company, at a time when many were beginning to question the lack of diverse representation in textbooks.

Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Willis Hudson, Section A2007\_174\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:21 2007/04/28

Cheryl Willis Hudson married Wade Hudson in 1972, and the couple soon moved to New Jersey. Hudson left her job at the Houghton Mifflin Company, and became a senior designer at the Macmillan Publishing Company. In the 1970s, questions began to arise about the lack of diversity depicted in textbooks, and Hudson helped organize a committee to identify stereotypical representations and create new standards for textbook images at Macmillan Publishing Company. With the birth of her daughter, Hudson became frustrated with the lack of African American children's books, so she created her own, the 'AFRO-BETS ABC Book.' After being rejected by several publishing companies, Hudson decided to publish the book herself, and founded the Just Us Books, Inc. publishing company with her husband. Their first printing was a success; and, with the help of their community, the company began to grow. Other books published by Just Us Books, Inc. included the 'Book of Black Heroes from A to Z' and 'Bright Eyes, Brown Skin.'

Video Oral History Interview with Cheryl Willis Hudson, Section A2007\_174\_001\_005, TRT: 0:27:16 2007/04/28

Cheryl Willis Hudson's publishing company, Just Us Books, Inc., received multiple awards for its books, including the BlackBoard Book of the Year and the Benjamin Franklin Award. The company was also awarded the Independent African American Publisher of the Year award by the BookExpo America trade organization. The company's publications were sold in independent African American bookstores, as well as through large retailers like the Kmart Corporation and Toys "R" Us, Inc. Along with Just Us Books, Inc., Hudson and her husband, Wade Hudson, founded the Knowledge is Power Project, a nonprofit organization that works to provide reading materials to children in need. Hudson talks about prominent writers and illustrators of African American children's books, what makes a successful children's book and her challenges and successes of Just Us Books, Inc. She describes how she would like to be remembered, and concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.