

WRITER, SPEAKER, ENTIRE MOOD.

# TRICIA ELAM WALKER

a writer writing and other things...



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WWW.TRICIAELAMWALKER.COM

## ABOUT

Tricia Elam Walker is an award-winning author, attorney and educator. Her first novel, *Breathing Room*, was published by Simon & Schuster/PocketBooks in 2001. Her work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *Essence* and other publications. She has provided commentary for NPR, CNN, the BBC and more. Tricia's short stories are included in the *O.Henry Prize Stories*, *New Stories from the South* and other anthologies and her essays are published in *Father's Songs*, *Dream Me Home Safely*, *It's All About Love* and more.

As the venue's 2018-19 visiting playwright, her plays, "Bold Moves" (4 short plays) and "With Glittering Eyes", were produced by Hibernian Hall in Boston in 2018 and 2019

Her first children's book, *Nana Akua Goes to School*, will be published by Random House in June 2020.

Tricia, a "Roxbury girl" from MA, received her J.D. from Northeastern University School of Law and her MFA from University of Maryland. She is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Howard University in Washington, DC.

Currently, Tricia resides in Takoma Park, MD with her husband where you can find her working on short stories, essays, another novel, more children's books and plays.



Give a brief description of *Nana Akua Goes to School*

*Nana Akua Goes to School* is the story of a little girl named Zura who is worried about taking her beloved Nana Akua to school on Grandparents Day. Nana's face bears traditional tribal scarring and Zura doesn't want kids to be mean or make fun of her grandmother. Nana has an idea about how to explain the symbolism of the scarring to the children while giving them symbols of their own. The plan works and Nana Akua's presentation is a big hit! This is a story of learning to appreciate and accept cultural differences.

Why is the topic of addressing diverse backgrounds important to address with children and schools?

It is important for children to know that even though we all look different and have varied experiences, none is better than the other. The more and earlier children learn about others who are different, the more it becomes normalized for them.

The idea of cultural differences is strong in *Nana Akua Goes to School*. What about that idea moved you?

Cultural differences were important to my parents who made sure we always knew about and celebrated from whence we came and I passed that on to my own children. Knowing where you come from and that African-descended people have such a regal history helps children of color to feel proud of who they are. These lessons are not always taught in schools. It is equally important for white children to know about diverse cultures as well. If so, we may have fewer of the racial issues that we are facing today.

How will reading your book change the minds/hearts/lives of your readers?

I hope that reading my book will teach children something they did not know and encourage them to be open, curious and appreciative when they meet those who are different from them in a myriad of ways.

What experiences led you to write *Nana Akua Goes to School*?

I didn't directly think about this experience when writing the book but I integrated an all girls' private school when I was 10 years old. The other girls would stare at me and ask if I could wash my color off. They stared at my hair because it didn't look like theirs. It was painful to be different and treated as such. Perhaps those memories were involved in the forming of this story. Overall I wanted the character to learn something as well as the readers.

*Nana Akua* is from Ghana. Tell us about how you decided on her character's background, and what makes her special.

Initially I wanted Nana to be from Senegal, because that is the only African country I have visited but I learned that scarification was not really done in Senegal so I switched to Ghana where it was performed.

What are some key takeaways that you hope readers find in your book?

Key takeaways: Love and appreciation for family, for grandparents, for cultural traditions like the quilt, playing the *djembe* drum and wearing African clothing, pride in heritage, celebration of diversity, creativity as a problem solver.

Do you envision this book becoming part of a series?

Hmmm. I hadn't thought of the book as part of a series but one never knows!

The writing style of Nana Akua Goes to School is so expressive. Can you tell us about how you came into your writing style?

I try to write the way I think people would speak to each other and I also want the writing to be accessible to children. Details and images matter to me as I want the reader to picture what I'm describing. I also had to think about writing so an illustrator can create an image.

The setting of Nana Akua Goes to School adds much to the texture of the story. Can you tell us about why you chose to set the story there? Is there a particular city in which this school setting exists?

Unless I spell it out, usually the characters are located where I am so that school and Zura's home are both somewhere in Maryland.

What was the most challenging part of writing this book?

Making sure we were as true and authentic to the Ghanaian culture as possible was the most challenging as I felt such a huge responsibility. Fortunately we had great experts around us we could and did call upon.

What is your favorite passage in Nana Akua Goes to School?

I actually love the line about "the kind of hug that wraps around you like a sweater" which is why it is repeated twice in the story.

Where can readers purchase your book?

Purchases can be made from everywhere you buy books!

Tell us the process for coming up with the cover with your illustrator.

I was not involved in the cover of the book. My discussions with the illustrator centered around the idea of the little girl having natural hair, the presence of colorful African fabrics and the warmth of the grandmother and her relationship with Zura.

What do you like to do when you are not writing?

I am almost always writing but I love to read when not writing, as well as exercise, cook, chant, have Zoom visits with my kids, take walks in nice weather, watch great tv shows or movies with my husband.

Tea or coffee? Paperback or eBook?

Matcha green tea mostly is what I drink with almond milk, hot usually, but also cold. Hardbacks and paperbacks – never ebooks or kindle!

“An open-hearted tribute to children with immigrant parents or grandparents.”

—Kirkus Reviews, starred review ★

“This lovely story explores the perennial fear of being different, while showcasing the great love between a grandparent and grandchild.”

—School Library Journal, starred review ★

“This beautiful picture book offers a helpful perspective on cultural differences within a heartening family story.”

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“A compelling portrait of a grandmother.”

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“Here is a story that is both highly specific in the culture represented and universal in its expressions of emotion and heritage.”

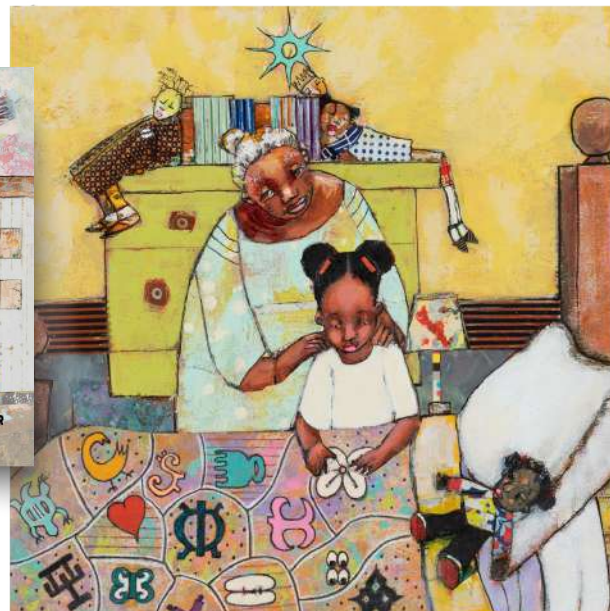
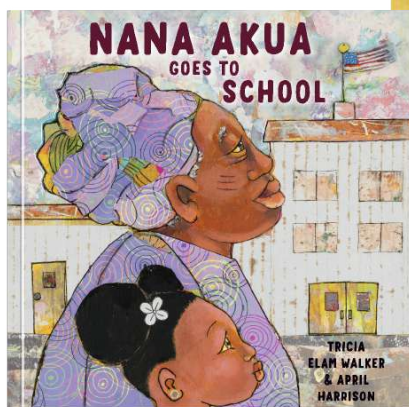
—The Horn Book Magazine

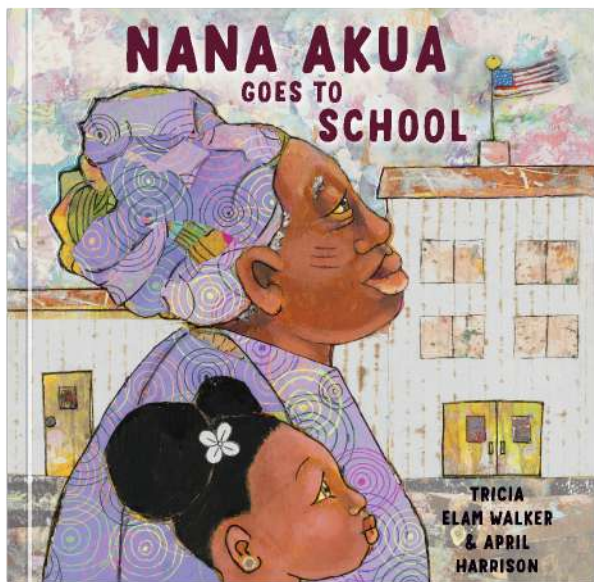
Read more at [triciaelamwalker.com/books](http://triciaelamwalker.com/books).

Nana Akua thinks for a moment. "I have an idea," she says, and puts Zura's arm through hers. Together they walk down the hall to Zura's room. Nana points to the bed. "How about we bring your favorite quilt to class? These quilt patterns come from another long-ago tradition. Even though they are not exactly the same as the marks on my face, they can help explain them. What do you think?"

Zura traces some of the designs she loves with her fingers. When Nana Akua first made the quilt for Zura, she explained that the patterns were Adinkra symbols of the Akan people of Ghana. The symbols represent more than fifty important qualities, like wisdom and creativity.

Zura wishes the marks were only on the quilt and not on Nana Akua's face. Still, she says, "Okay, we can bring it."





# NANA AKUA GOES TO SCHOOL

In this moving story that celebrates cultural diversity, a shy girl brings her West African grandmother—whose face bears traditional tribal markings—to meet her classmates. NANA AKUA GOES TO SCHOOL (Schwartz & Wade Books | On Sale June 16, 2020 | Ages 4–8) is a moving story about embracing your culture, perfect for readers of all ages, from kids to grandparents!

By Tricia Elam Walker  
Illustrated by April Harrison

Formats: Hardcover, Ebook

Suggested Retail Price: \$17.99

Title: Nana Akua Goes To School

Author: Tricia Elam Walker

Category/Genre: Children's Picture Books

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Available From: Amazon & Penguin Random House

## FOCAL POINTS

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## REVIEWS

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