



# Jingle Dancer

by Cynthia Leitich Smith, Morrow Junior Books, 2000

Illustrated by Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu

Recommended for ages 4 to 10

**SYNOPSIS:** “Jenna loves the tradition of jingle dancing that has been shared by generations of women in her family, and she hopes to dance at the next powwow. But she has a problem—how will her dress sing if it has no jingles? The warm, evocative watercolors of Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu bring Jenna to life and complement author Cynthia Leitich Smith’s lyrical text as she tells the affirming story of how a contemporary Native American girl turns to her family and community to help her dance finds a voice.” (From *Jingle Dancer*)

**CYNTHIA LEITICH SMITH** has worked in law, public relations, and journalism. She is a mixed-blood member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. Ms. Smith lives in Austin, Texas, with her husband and a gray tabby. This is her first book.

**CORNELIUS VAN WRIGHT AND YING-HWA HU** have illustrated many picture books, including *Jewels*, by Belinda Rochelle which was selected as a Notable Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies. The couple lives in New York City with their daughter and son.

**Review:** “*This picture book will not only satisfy a need for materials on Native American customs, but will also be a welcome addition to stories about traditions passed down by the women of a culture.*” — School Library Journal

## Cultural Significance:

This is Cynthia Leitich Smith’s first picture book. It received rave reviews for a story of First Nation people free of the stereotypes sometimes associated with them. Instead, the story shows Jenna, the leading character watching her grandma dance on a video tape, visiting a friend in a duplex in the community, and talking with her lawyer aunt. She is given a contemporary character—an average American kid living in suburbia and calling her community of supportive females to overcome a problem as she tries to put together her regalia for the jingle dance.

Readers who are not familiar with the custom presented in the story will have the opportunity to learn something about the preparation for a powwow. This is a Native American social and spiritual event that includes dancing, drumming, singing, eating, and sometimes camping, trading, storytelling, rodeos, or film and art shows to celebrate and preserve traditions. Powwows are held at various times of the year, although most take place in the summer. In this story, the powwows are intertribal. Native peoples of many Nations participate in such Pan-Indian events.

There is hunger for a body of children’s literature written by Native American authors. The Indian community cries for stories about them written with their own voice, but they are underrepresented because Native American stories were capitalized and corrupted by their oppressors.\* To show justice and respect, this anthology will intentionally pick stories written by them. By choosing stories written by native authors, children outside the First Nation community will learn that Indian children are alive, well, and living rich lives like everyone else.

A significant cultural aspect in the story focused on collectivist understanding of the individual self. Jenna at the end of the story was dancing for “parts of the whole.” Jenna was not dancing for Jenna, but was also dancing for her aunt, neighbor, cousin, and grandma. The important women in her life made up the whole of her. The story highlighted the closeness of Jenna’s community through their tradition of powwows. Collectivists are closely linked individuals that at the very core of the self is not an island, but a merging of “significant others” as one unified bond of a family or community. \*\*

**Faith focus:**

In Jenna's effort to find jingles for her dress, where did she go? She seemed to be confident she would find them. She went to her community of women! Jenna warmed her way into the hearts of the women close to her, asking for jingles to sew on her dress. While dancing the jingle dance and remembering the women that contributed to complete her jingle dress, Jenna felt connected to them. A part of them was with Jenna as if they too were dancing. Sometimes, in a closely-knit community, one's individual needs are put aside to meet the demands and needs of the group. How could one maintain being oneself and at the same time be there for the group? How did Jenna do this in the story? What a joy to see Jenna's character unfold in this story.

**Family activity:**

Discuss a special tradition or ritual of your family that has given you a special joy and happiness. Is there a story behind this special family ritual/tradition? You may illustrate it on the next page. Perhaps, you may want to share your picture during the "Show and Tell" time in class at your school.

**Bible passage:**

*"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."* Galatians 5:22 (NRSV)

Have you met a person embodying the fruits of the Spirit? What about the character of Jenna in the story?

*\*A Broken Flute, The Native Experience in Books for Children* edited by Doris Seale and Beverly Slapin, Altamira Press, 2006

*\*\*The Art of Japanese Management* by Richard Tanner Pescale and Anthony G. Athos, Warner Books, 1981

**PRAYER** *(for children) or one can pray from the heart or just have a silent moment:*

**Dear God, Thank you for families and communities that give support in our time of need. In Jesus' name, Amen.**

A simple line drawing of a house with a chimney emitting smoke. The house is outlined in black, with a triangular roof and a rectangular body. A chimney is located on the right side of the roof, with three wavy lines representing smoke rising from it. The text "My Family's Special Tradition" is centered within the house's outline.

**My  
Family's  
Special Tradition**