



***Kadir Nelson***

**TeachingBooks.net Original In-depth  
Author Interview**

**Kadir Nelson, interviewed in his San Diego County, California studio on September 7, 2010.**

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You hold multiple awards for your books for children, specifically for your illustrations: the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award, the Caldecott Honor Award and the NAACP Image Award among many. Please share what your childhood was like; have you always been an artist?

**KADIR NELSON:** I have two sisters and a brother, and we all were into our own things. I was a kid that liked to draw more than anybody else, and I really wanted to get better. I also loved the attention I got from drawing. It's nice to be good at something.

We moved around a lot when I was a kid, so whenever I'd go to a new class, I'd start drawing or ask someone if they liked to draw, and that kind of broke the ice. My mother made sure I always had art supplies, and I drew every day—all the way through elementary school, junior high, and high school.

My uncle, who's an art teacher, took me under his wing and gave me a really strong foundation in art. I spent summers with him, and he taught me how to draw, how to see, how to mix colors, how to use different mediums and perspective, and so forth. He really gave me a head start on my peers. I ended up getting a scholarship to study art at Pratt Institute.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What did you like to draw?

**KADIR NELSON:** As a kid, I drew cartoon characters and comic book heroes. Spiderman and the X-Men were my favorites.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How did your art focus change as you grew up?

**KADIR NELSON:** My first year of college, I went to architecture school because people had always said that it's hard to make a living as an artist, and you won't be able to provide for yourself or have any notoriety until you're dead. I didn't like that scenario, so I thought that I would study architecture and get a "real" job.

But the only thing I liked about studying architecture was design. I didn't enjoy anything else about it, so after a semester I switched over to illustration and decided that I really wanted to make a serious go at art.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** There were a number of children's book illustrators at Pratt. Did any of them influence you?

**KADIR NELSON:** No, I didn't even think about children's book illustration when I was in school. I wanted to be either a gallery artist or just a freelance artist doing editorial, CD covers, advertising, and stuff like that.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What kind of jobs did you have while you were in school?

**KADIR NELSON:** I paid for my tuition by selling paintings and drawings, and I got a big job doing some T-shirt designs for Nike. Right after I graduated, I got a big job for *Sports Illustrated* and with DreamWorks on the movie *Amistad*.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What did you do for *Amistad*?

**KADIR NELSON:** I did concept work called "visual development," which means I was illustrating key scenes from the movie. It's different from storyboard, which is shot-by-shot illustration. I illustrated specific scenes to establish a tone, a look, a palette, and a mood for each scene during the movie.

They hired a number of African American artists to tell the story of *Amistad* for Steven Spielberg in order to convince him to take on the movie. Steven wasn't really sure if he was the right director, because he isn't an African American, and he wanted to make sure that he could tell it in a confident way.

Over the course of six months, we did tons of work, and, using our illustrations, they walked Steven through the movie so he could see what it could look like and could be able to tell the story with confidence.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** When did your art begin to take on its very strong African American themes?

**KADIR NELSON:** I think it was in high school—in the early 1990s. There were a lot of very strong, positive images of African Americans that were prevalent in music and film and television at that time.

Spike Lee was doing his thing with movies, and there were a lot of hip-hop groups that had that very strong theme of positive affirmation of identifying with your African ancestry and roots. There were also a number of television shows

featuring strong African American characters. The idea of embracing African American culture was blossoming, and I became attracted to it and wanted to become part of it and contribute to it.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Is that how you came to get the *Amistad* work?

**KADIR NELSON:** A lot of the work that I was doing when I was in college had to do with my African American ancestry. I loved doing historical artwork, so serendipitously, the *Amistad* project appeared right after I graduated from college. There was a lot of momentum that made that happen.

I was a good student. I got really good grades, and I was very proud that I stayed on top of my work. As a result of my hard work in school, I got an internship at Society of Illustrators in New York, and I interned there for a month. As a result of doing that, they gave me a ticket to one of their shows.

I went to the show, and I met a young lady there who had just graduated. I was passing out my new business cards, and I gave one to her. A week or two later, she called and told me she had this job she couldn't do. She thought she wasn't the right person for it, and she thought I was a better fit. I took the job, which needed to be done in maybe three days.

I met with the guy regarding that job, and he liked my work, so I did the job for him and got him out of that pinch. He liked me and my work so much that he wanted to help me get started in my career. I gave him a portfolio of my work, and he sent a few pages around. One of them ended up at a record company in Los Angeles, and someone at the record company knew about this film in the works at DreamWorks—which was a brand-new studio at that time.

They passed my work on to the production designer at DreamWorks, whose name was Rick Carter. He liked it, and they called me. I had just gotten married, and I was on my honeymoon when I get this call from DreamWorks as well as from *Sports Illustrated* about two really big projects. I was very fortunate because my wife and I were expecting, and I didn't have a job.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You succeeded because you worked hard in school and people were interested in your work.

**KADIR NELSON:** I think it was a combination of hard work, willpower, and also preparing myself for any opportunity that might cross my path. All students know what it feels like not to be prepared for a big test or not doing your homework and then realizing that you could have really taken advantage of it if you would have just done the groundwork.

I knew that I was doing the groundwork. My mother had always talked about the power of visualization and self-realization—that if you want to be successful at something, you should imagine yourself doing it and prepare yourself for it. That's

what I was doing. It's kind of like blind faith, but I believed very strongly that I was going to succeed at whatever it was that I was going to do—if just given the opportunity. For some reason, I knew that something was coming, because I wanted it so badly.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You worked in illustration and on some incredible professional jobs, and then made yourself a niche in children's book art. How did that prepare you for work in children's books?

**KADIR NELSON:** When doing artwork for film, a lot of the skills that are necessary for that type of work lend themselves very well to doing children's book art. You have to learn how to do character design and environmental design, and you have to tell stories with your artwork using color and lighting and so forth. Those are really great tools for children's books.

For me, each book is kind of like a silent film. If you were to remove the words and just look at the pictures, you should be able to tell what the story is about without having to read a word of text. That's what I think I brought from doing artwork for film to doing artwork for books.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Was *Brothers of the Knight* your first children's book?

**KADIR NELSON:** That was the first one that was published. The first one that I began working on was *Big Jabe*, but *Brothers of the Knight* had an accelerated schedule, so I ended up doing that one before *Big Jabe*.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Do you want to talk about those early books?

**KADIR NELSON:** In the early books, I had to figure out my method of working. In *Brothers of the Knight*, since it was such an accelerated schedule, I didn't know how I was going to do it so quickly.

When I was in college, my mother and I were working on this board game, and there were so many portraits of people that I ended up making photocopies of their photographs and then painting over the photocopy.

When I had this book to do, I realized I didn't have that much time, so I just photocopied all of my sketches and painted over the photocopies, and that worked out pretty well. I was able to meet my deadline and please the art directors and the editors, so that's the style that I used to work in for some of my earlier books like *Brothers of the Knight*, *Big Jabe*, *Salt in His Shoes*, *Dancing in the Wings*.

For *Just the Two of Us*, I decided that I didn't need to photocopy that stuff anymore. I could just draw. I was confident enough in the technique that I

could just paint over my pencil drawings. From then on, I didn't make any more photocopies; I just went straight to painting over the pencil drawings.

Then I got kind of tired of doing it that way, and I decided I wouldn't need to have the pencil drawings for the line in the book, I would just do paintings. And that's what I've done for the last maybe two, three books.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** More confidence makes all the difference in the world.

**KADIR NELSON:** Well, I think it's important to have confidence, but then it's also important to try to try something new, to leave your comfort zone to try to grow. That's why I'm trying to grow as an artist and trying to figure out what kind of artist I want to be.

I want my work to be relevant, and I have to figure out what that means for me. There's not really much new with art media. What's important about the artists we learn about in art history and see in all the art books is that they have somehow pushed the boundaries of what people think art is or should be, and that's how they've made their work relevant. That's what I'm trying to figure out for myself.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What was it like to be asked to illustrate a book about Michael Jordan?

**KADIR NELSON:** Oh, that was really cool, because I was a Michael Jordan nut when I was a kid. He was my hero: my whole bedroom wall was plastered with Michael Jordan. I got to meet him when I was 16 or so.

Then recently, I got to work with his mother and his sister, and now we have a really good relationship. It's nice to meet your heroes, and it's even nice to meet your hero's mother and sister. I was really glad to get that job.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** One of the more playful books you've illustrated, *Please, Baby, Please* is just delightful. Is there something about trying to just have fun with your art?

**KADIR NELSON:** The Spike Lee books (*Please, Baby, Please* and *Please, Puppy, Please*) were during a point in my life where my kids were little—and I was living that—so it was easy to put that into the work. I was really trying to win my kids over, because they didn't really like any of the books that I had done before. I figured if I put them in the books, then maybe they would like them. They liked them for two seconds and then moved on to the next thing.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You've worked on children's books with many families of celebrities, if not the celebrities themselves, from Spike Lee and Will Smith, to the Robinson family and the Jordan family.

**KADIR NELSON:** It certainly wasn't my plan to illustrate celebrity books specifically. I want to find sound stories—whether they are written by celebrities or not—and tell the story in an honest way.

Hopefully, if you do it right and do the artwork well, then you can get the book past the stigma that celebrity books tend to have, because your work gives legitimacy to the story.

Fortunately, when you do books with celebrities, you get more press than you would for other books, and it helps bring more attention to the work that you do as well.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Change Has Come* is your book about the election of President Barack Obama. What was it like to make that book?

**KADIR NELSON:** The publisher came to me when I was travelling, and asked me if I was interested in doing a book on Obama, and I wasn't. There had been so many Obama books done already. It was right after the election, and I didn't think I had anything more to contribute to what had already been published or was being published. But their idea, which I liked, was to do kind of a sketchbook documentary of this historic election. I thought it was a really great idea. I had 10 days to do that book, and I was travelling half of those days. That was a bit tricky.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What about the topic of *Change Has Come*? What did you want to cover?

**KADIR NELSON:** I was documenting the election. There was this air of euphoria over a little more than half of the country, and I really wanted to try to distill a bit of that and show how important and magical this election was.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What was it about story in *The Village That Vanished* that resonated with you?

**KADIR NELSON:** I like the spiritual quality of *The Village That Vanished* and how it opens with her standing at the river reciting this prayer. I really like the connection to nature as well. There's something similar about *Mama Miti* and *Moses* and those types of books that resonates with me. Perhaps it's the spiritual quality.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Moses* seemed to change things for you in a really incredible way.

**KADIR NELSON:** I wasn't looking at that story as something that could change my career in any way. I approached *Moses* the same as books before it; I was finding a sound story in order to illustrate something that I really cared about. I liked the story: I liked how it was told, and I liked the spiritual element of it. And, of course, it was historic. It hit on a lot of the things that I really liked, including Harriet Tubman.

My grandmother had always reminded me of Harriet Tubman quite a bit, so doing the art for *Moses* was really a tribute to not only Harriet but to my grandmother as well.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Why are you drawn to historical subjects?

**KADIR NELSON:** It's just a search for truth. I think all of us have to find our own truths, and for me, this is part of it. When we learn about history in school or in books, we don't always get the whole truth, and that's kind of what I'm searching for.

So when I do a book on the Negro baseball leagues or Harriet Tubman or what have you, it's really a matter of trying to learn that truth for myself.

When I learn something and am inspired by it, it motivates me to share it with other people. Children's books are a really great platform that allows me to do that.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please talk about *We Are The Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball* from both a writer's standpoint and an illustrator's standpoint.

**KADIR NELSON:** That was a really good time, because I was able to meet a lot of current and retired players, and I went to a lot of baseball games. I learned a lot, not only about the Negro leagues, but I learned that I could write well enough to be published. That was really unexpected and not something that I wanted to do at first, but I got the green light from my editor, so I just had to step up and do my best.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How would you describe the perspective from which you wrote *We Are The Ship*?

**KADIR NELSON:** It's written from the perspective of an elder player who had seen it all, and he's telling the story as he knew it and as all the players knew it. There's this collective voice saying, "This is how we did it, this is what it was like for us, and this is how we made history."

It is told in a voice that is very humble, very honest, and very upbeat. When you hear people talk about what it was like in the old days, especially during that era in American history, it's not always upbeat because there's a lot of ugliness to that period of time. But this character was able to look beyond and transcend all of that negativity that they faced, because they were able to play in the game that they loved.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** And then you got recognized for your writing with a Coretta Scott King Author Award and the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal.

**KADIR NELSON:** It's kind of a strange thing, because I knew that I could tell stories with my art but not with my words. I'm an artist by trade and an author by necessity. To even try to step into the shoes of an author was really daunting.

The awards still surprise me to this day, because I still don't consider myself an author even though I've written that book, and now I'm writing another couple of books.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What else are you writing?

**KADIR NELSON:** I've written a picture book biography of Nelson Mandela, and I'm putting the finishing touches on a book on American history told from an African American perspective. It is in a similar format to *We Are The Ship*—a picture book in chapter book format, with pictures on every page.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Besides unearthing truth, or trying to let kids understand who these great people were, what else are you accomplishing with you picture book biographies?

**KADIR NELSON:** I'm trying to tell the story in a way that it needs to be told, and I am trying to put some people in front of young people who they may not be familiar with—whom they may not learn much about in school—and make the learning enjoyable.

Everyone knows about Martin Luther King, Jr., but not a lot of people know about Coretta Scott King or her silent but important role in the civil rights movement. Or Nelson Mandela: we don't really learn much about him—there might be a paragraph or so in a book. Or Henry Box Brown—no one really knows much about him.

But when you give this book to a teacher, then he or she can take that book and teach kids about parts of history that they might not even know about, and they can make it a lot more fun. Because of *Henry's Freedom Box*, I've heard of a

number of teachers across the country actually building a box for kids to get in, step into to make that history even more tangible.

*Ellington* does that. It takes a lot of really interesting stories and brings historical icons down to the ground so kids can look up to them and see that they were real people.

It's the same thing with Abraham Lincoln. We learn a lot about him, but what I really wanted to do with *Abe* was to try to take him off that pedestal for a minute and look at him as a human being that actually walked the earth.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What work are you now doing that's not book art?

**KADIR NELSON:** I do a bit of advertising work every year. The last two years, I did work for Coca Cola for their Black History Month and music festival promotions that they do.

When I have time, I do my own paintings that go in the gallery or on someone's wall.

The biggest job that I've ever done, which I just finished, was an album cover for Michael Jackson's next release. It's a big mural that details his whole life from when he was a young kid with the Jacksons growing up with his brothers and sisters, through *Thriller*, all the way to *This Is It*, the movie. It was a big job. I worked on that painting for a year.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You have also illustrated postage stamps.

**KADIR NELSON:** I wanted to do those ever since I was in college when my teacher really talked them up. Twelve years after I graduated, I got a call from an art director at the post office, and she had a stamp for me. They had had a Negro League stamp in the works for a long time, but they couldn't make it work. I was finishing *We Are The Ship*, and I had all this Negro League artwork. Once they saw my work, they gave me a shot.

There's not a lot of space to work with on a stamp, so they have to maximize the space usage. It really took some doing; the people at the post office are very specific about placement and making sure that it's absolutely perfect.

I've also done stamps of Anna Julia Cooper—who was an African American educator who held a doctoral degree when that was rare, and the Richard Wright stamp for the author series.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Do you find there's a lot more freedom in creating a stand-alone painting compared to a series of paintings for a book?

**KADIR NELSON:** Actually, I try to make each painting independent, even in books. We shouldn't have to look at a painting and feel like there's something missing. It should be able to stand on its own. I think that's part of what makes some of the work that I do more successful than not; I try to make each painting a work of art on its own.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you do when you get stuck?

**KADIR NELSON:** Nikki Giovanni said that there's no such thing as writer's block, there's only a lack of information. So if I get stuck, that means that I don't have enough information, whether it's for a painting or for something that I'm writing.

I never got stuck on the *We Are the Ship*, because I knew that story inside and out. I'd read tons and tons of books and interviews, I'd interviewed people myself, and I'd looked at documentaries. I'm so familiar with that story that it really just kind of wrote itself.

The American history book I've worked on recently has been more of a challenge, because I'll get to a part of history where I really don't know much about it, and I'll have to go and read a lot and find out more about it. Then, it's easy. If you don't know what you're talking about, then you really don't have anything to say.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What are you exploring in the American history book?

**KADIR NELSON:** When you are in school they can only give you a little bit of history. That really wasn't enough for me to understand, for example, why race is still so important in 2010. Or what World War II was all about; what World War I was all about, and how did it affect your average African American citizen at that time? Those are questions that I didn't have an answer to until I started reading for and writing this book.

People ask me, "Are you writing about the *real* American history, or are you . . ." and I say, "Wait a minute, I'm writing this book for children. I can't get into a lot of the more complex history that a lot of us like to dig our teeth into."

It can't be so honest that it puts people off. There's a lot of ugliness to American history as within any history, and it's a matter of trying to tell it in a very tasteful way.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please describe a typical day for you.

**KADIR NELSON:** I used to cook breakfast for my kids, but my daughter's old enough that she can cook breakfast for herself and her sister, which is nice, so I get another half hour of sleep. Then I take my daughters to school, and I come

home and play with my two-year-old son. Once my wife takes him, then I have pretty much the day to work.

I'll do my bit of administrative stuff, I'll do some stalling, and then I'll get into what I need to do.

For example, right now, I'm doing a painting of the storming of Fort Wagner by the Glory Regiment 54. I'm painting a couple hundred people, and it's a daunting task. So I stall before I start painting each day, and then I get into it, and I realize, "Man, I stalled too long, I should have been painting two hours ago!" But it's just how it goes.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you like to tell students?

**KADIR NELSON:** Much of the message that I try to put across to students is that they have to figure out what they really like to do and find a way to do that as an adult for their jobs. A lot of people have jobs they don't like, and it makes for very unhappy people. So I tell them if you like to write, or run around, or dig in the dirt, then find a job that will allow you to do that, and you'll be happy.

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