



Vaunda Micheaux Nelson

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

Vaunda Micheaux Nelson, interviewed in her New Mexico home on May 17, 2013.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have been a teacher and bookseller, a two-time Newbery committee member, and you're currently are a children's librarian, and award-winning author of children's books. Where and when did your love of stories begin?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: My love of stories and books started before I began writing them. I grew up in Elizabeth, Pennsylvania, a small town south of Pittsburgh. We didn't have a lot of kids' books growing up, but my mom read to us every day. Even when there was a babysitter, she'd leave the sitter instructions saying, "This is the chapter that you need to read to my children."

My dad would sometimes share poetry with us. He knew a lot of poems from memory, like *O Captain! My Captain!* and *Paul Revere's Ride*. One of my favorites was *Little Orphan Annie*, by James Whitcomb Riley, which was rather scary.

TEACHINGBOOKS: When did it cross your mind that you might someday be a writer?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: I didn't know I would be a writer when I was very young. Back then, I just knew that I loved stories and looked forward to hearing them at bedtime. But as my siblings and I grew, we started making up stories and plays that we would perform. We had what we called "amateur hour" on the back porch in the evening—we'd go out and take turns standing up to perform a skit or recite a poem or sing, because music was a big part of our lives as well.

When I was about eleven or twelve, I started writing little poems—not very good ones, of course, but that's how you start—and when I was in high school my poetry began to reflect the human rights struggle. I remember a poem I wrote about a captive bird. It was about freedom and Martin Luther King, Jr. being murdered.

Around that same time I was inspired by John Lennon's book, *In His Own Write*. I was a serious Beatle fan. Some of Lennon's stories were nonsensical, written in a kind of garbled language; they may have meant more than I could interpret at that age. But I tried writing stories that were like those, because young writers often start off imitating other writers.

I knew how it felt to be completely engrossed in a story, and the more I wrote, the more I began to think that maybe I could make someone else feel that way, too.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Much of your writing in high school tackled issues of equality. What gave you such a strong sense of social justice at such a young age?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: When I was growing up, the borough we lived in was basically a white community. Although Elizabeth was an integrated town and the schools there generally had a fair number of African American students, I went to an all-white school because our house fell within another district.

My siblings and I were the first blacks who attended our elementary school. I'm the youngest of five, so my oldest brother, Eddie, was actually the first in our school. I know he dealt with some difficult situations and paved the way for the rest of us.

Even so, when I started first grade around 1958, I had some issues with name-calling and playground fights. When I'd get in trouble at school for fighting, I could count on going home and getting in trouble all over again with my parents. Regardless of the reason for a problem, they did not tolerate violence as a solution. Punching someone in the nose was not the answer. I'd ask my mother what to do instead, and she'd say, "Just be as nice as you can be." It was hard to do, but more often than not, it worked. People who are mean often don't know how to handle nice.

We've all said and done things to others that we've regretted later on. As I got older, I became much more careful about my language with other people. One thing my father in particular taught me is how powerful words are. They can do wonderful things, and lift a person up, but they can also do damage. You never know how long someone might carry hurtful words you've said, and saying "I'm sorry" doesn't always fix things.

It's important to say that, despite everything, I loved school and, overall, had what I consider a happy childhood. Many children have obstacles of one kind or another to overcome -- weight, learning difficulties, speech impediments. My issue just happened to be related to race.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Many of your books are grounded in African American history and the African American experience. Please talk about the importance of this theme and its influence on your writing.

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: In some ways, I think I'm making up for lost time. I wasn't really educated about black history as a young person. I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about race, maybe because I was sort of in two worlds. I went to an all-white school and an all-black church, and learned to exist and function and feel comfortable in both.

When I went to college in 1971, many of the black students were part of a group that focused on black power and awareness, but I didn't fit in with them because I didn't share that awareness. In the end, it was my roommates who helped shed light on these things for me. The school paired me with a black roommate—I think it was by design—and she and another black girl and I roomed together the rest of our college years. Both of them grew up in strong black communities and had a whole different kind of childhood than I did. I learned so much from them, the most important lesson being that I didn't have to worry about fitting in. I just needed to be myself and find a way to help others see me for who I am, and be proud of that person.

As I grew older, I became more and more interested in learning about my history. And I think the fact that African American history inspires so much of my writing is an indication of my desire to be involved in a way I was not as a younger person.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Mayfield Crossing* and *Beyond Mayfield* touch upon themes of integration in the 1960s. Did you draw from your own experiences when writing these books?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: When people ask me if the Mayfield books are about me, the answer is, yes and no. Many of Meg Turner's experiences and feelings were mine. But the books aren't so much autobiographical in the sense that I'm telling exactly what happened to me. They're more about dealing with questions and issues that I didn't deal with then—and finding closure through my fiction.

Mayfield Crossing started as a picture book manuscript about a group of kids who were scared of a man in their neighborhood. It wasn't working for my publisher, and finally someone said, you need to either simplify this or expand it into a novel. As I revised, I realized a novel was the right way to go, because I was dealing with racial issues that were a little too complex, a little too large, for a picture book.

Baseball was a big part of our lives growing up, and I wanted that to become part of the story as well. My memories of what my parents taught me—their advice to get along with people even though some of them won't treat you right, was something I wanted to explore, too. I also wanted to examine the question of how a person who has been subjected to racism can avoid becoming hateful himself.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Almost to Freedom* is a story of an escape from slavery, told memorably from the point of view of Sally, a young girl's rag doll. How did you settle upon Sally's voice?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: *Almost to Freedom* was a breakthrough book in some ways for me, because my previous books had been based at some level on personal experience. With *Almost to Freedom*, I was dealing with the Underground Railroad, which, of course, I did not personally experience, and I didn't speak the language of that time. I had to do quite a bit of research on both. I listened to audio recordings of former slaves speaking, and I read books that were written in the dialect of the time.

After a while, Sally's voice came to me in my head. I know how dialect can make reading more difficult and slow down the storytelling if it's used too heavily. I tried to craft the language in a way that might be 'just enough.' After I had a draft I felt I could share, I sent it to Ashley Bryan, who has worked quite a bit with dialect. He helped me feel more confident about creating something that wasn't from my own experience.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Bad News for Outlaws: The Remarkable Life of Bass Reeves, Deputy U.S. Marshall* was a Coretta Scott King Book Award winner. How did you come to write this story?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: I stumbled onto the story of Bass Reeves. My husband, Drew, is a Western enthusiast, and I'm intrigued by the West, too, but I'm also very interested in black history. My husband recorded a program on blacks in the West for us to watch, and it made a tiny little mention of Bass Reeves. I'd never heard of him, but Drew knew a bit, and what he told me made me think: I need to find out more about this person. So I went to the library, and the librarian in me took over. I started researching. The more I found out, the more amazed I became about this person who had started out as a slave and became one of the most effective lawmen who ever existed.

I noticed that many of the sources I pulled together cited an historian named Art T. Burton, who is the real expert on Bass Reeves and has published a lot of adult

material about him. So I contacted Art, and he was incredibly supportive of the idea of a children's book about Bass. If I wasn't passionate about telling Bass's story before I talked to Art, there was no way I wasn't going to do it after we spoke. He ended up reviewing the manuscript for accuracy and generously gave his time as a go-to person when I had questions.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you have anything to do with ensuring historical accuracy when it comes to illustrations?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: Because a lot of my work is historical, my editors are careful about accuracy. They know I've done the research, so they will show me early illustrator sketches, and I can offer input. For instance, in sketches for *Bad News for Outlaws*, I noticed in the scene where Bass has to get a steer out of the mud, he was shown outside the mud, pulling the steer with a rope. The real story was that Bass took off all his clothes and got in the mud with the steer, and helped the steer work its way out. The final illustration now reflects this.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *No Crystal Stair: A Documentary Novel of the Life and Work of Lewis Michaux, Harlem Bookseller* won the Boston Globe Horn Book award for fiction, a Coretta Scott King Author Honor award, and is based on the work of your great-uncle. How did you piece together his story?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: I knew about the bookstore growing up, but only vaguely. It wasn't until I started library school in Pittsburgh and people began asking me if I was related to "that bookseller" that the significance of the store hit me.

So I started finding out what I could about the store and Lewis. The more I learned, and the more I connected with people Lewis had interacted with, the more I wanted to write his biography. But when I shared an early manuscript with an editor, she raised a lot of good questions that I knew I wasn't going to be able to answer. And when I reread it, I felt I hadn't brought Lewis's character to life.

I really loved *Talkin' About Bessie* by Nikki Grimes, and *Carver: A Life In Poems* by Marilyn Nelson—these authors used poetry and different points of view to tell their subjects' stories. They left me with a feeling of the real essence of, a fresh view of, these two famous individuals. I thought maybe I could do something similar but in prose, so I started creating voices of the people who surrounded Lewis. I knew in doing that, I was stepping into fiction, but I thought this format would give me the flexibility I needed

to paint a picture of Lewis's life and the kind of person he was. Creating those different voices was some of the most fun I've had as a writer.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books focus on multicultural themes. What are your thoughts about the state of multicultural books for children?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: There certainly are a lot more multicultural materials out there for children now than there were when I was growing up. We can always use more, of course, but there are a lot of options out there. I think one of the things that educators need to do is seek them out, and use them with young people—whether they're children of color or not. Many people have said this, but I think it needs to be repeated, that it doesn't have to be Black History Month—or any particular month—for people to promote and read multicultural books.

I would like to see more books with main characters of color that are not about history or culture but are about contemporary African American kids just doing everyday things. *Ready? Set. Raymond!*, *Possibles*, and *Who Will I Be, Lord?* fall into this category, and I would like to do more. I also would really love to see a series featuring an African American main character take off like *The Hunger Games* or *Harry Potter*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about what it's like to be an author serving on book committees like the Newbery.

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: I've served on the Newbery committee twice, and both times were quite wonderful. But as a writer, it's possible to lose a little confidence, serving on committees like these. You're reading all these wonderful books, and on some level, you think, "Oh my gosh, will I ever be able to write like this?"

But on the other hand, it's gratifying to see how carefully the people on these committees read the books and how much they care about the process, how much they pay attention to the craft and the work that has gone into each book. It made me realize that all the blood, sweat and tears I put into every sentence, every word, is worth it because someone notices.

The first time I served on the Newbery was the same year I wrote *Mayfield Crossing*. And somebody asked how I did it—writing the book while working full time and serving on the committee all at once. I think I was so stimulated that I couldn't *not* write. All the wonderful stuff I was reading inspired me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: As a writer, what do you do when you get stuck?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: It depends. Sometimes I stay in my chair and sit there facing a blank screen for a long time until something starts to come. Maybe it's just one sentence, but if I can write one sentence, then I'll feel I've moved forward. Sometimes I shut things down and read or take a walk. Sometimes I'll take it to my writing group and say, now what?

No matter what, I always keep in mind what Jerry Spinelli told a fifth grade class when asked about writer's block. Jerry asked what would happen if you broke a pipe in the kitchen and there was water flowing all over the floors. And when you called the plumber, the plumber said, "I can't come over, I have plumber's block." Or what if the brain surgeon in the middle of operating on you said, "Oh, I can't go on, I've got surgeon's block." Basically, he's saying you just have to move forward and do the work.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is a typical workday for you?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: I work full time at the library. I use a lot of creative energy there, so I don't have much left at night. Much of my writing will take place on the weekend. I'll try to get up early, because I'm best in the morning, and work until noon or so, and I'll spend the afternoon reading and revising what I've written.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You get to speak to a lot of young people. What do you like to tell them?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: I like to talk to them about the importance of reading. As a librarian I often ask kids if they have parents who read to them. Some do and some don't. I tell them to applaud their parents if they are being read to, and if they're not, I say, "If you'd like your parents to read to you, you should just go home and ask them." I also make it clear to older kids reading on their own that if they'd still like to be read to, they should say so. I encourage kids to become readers, because what you read builds up inside you and provides a foundation from which you can draw and learn.

Also, kids often ask how many books I've written, and I'll answer by telling them how many I've published—and how many more I've written that are stashed away in a drawer. I'll say that most of those will never be published, but writing them was not a waste of time. I talk about the importance of practice, and how you have to stay in writing shape. What I learned from writing those unpublished manuscripts helped give me the skill to write the books that *were* published.

I also talk to them about the revision process, and how grateful I am to editors for their suggestions. So the next time they turn something in and their parents or teachers offer feedback, I hope they'll see revision as an opportunity to make their work better, because we don't always get second chances in life.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell educators?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: I like to remind them that all ages like a good story. I think a lot of people who work with older kids forget how great reading aloud to them can be. They enjoy it. Sometimes a school will bring their teenagers into the library to learn about what resources we have available and how to research. Whenever we're done, we bring the kids into the program room and do stories with them. Sometimes the teachers ask if we need to do that. We don't need to, of course, but we think it's always an enjoyable note to end on. And every time we've done it, the kids want more. So I make an effort to encourage educators to remember that people of all ages enjoy being read to. Even grownups.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell parents?

VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON: As with educators, I stress the importance of reading aloud to their children. But I also like to encourage parents to preserve their family records, and encourage their children to remember family stories. I started late in learning my family history, and there is so much information, and so many stories that I know have been lost. There are questions that will never be answered. It's incredibly frustrating.

So I advise them to share family stories, and take advantage of online heritage databases. I also tell them to sit down with relatives and ask them about family photographs. Who is in the picture? Where and when was it taken? If they write all this information on the back of the photo, when their kids or grandkids are grown up, they won't have to wonder.

My great-uncle Lewis believed that if you don't know your history, you can't truly know who you are, you can't move forward. I've been on a mission to encourage people to find out about their families, to listen to the stories, make a record, and to pass them on. It can be so wonderful to find out about your family history... I don't know if young people are catching on to that fact, but I'd like to see it happen. So next Thanksgiving when Grand-pap starts to tell his tales that you think you've heard a hundred times before, rather than roll your eyes and tune him out, lean forward and ask questions.

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For more information about Vaunda Micheaux Nelson and her books, go to <http://teachingbooks.net/>.

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