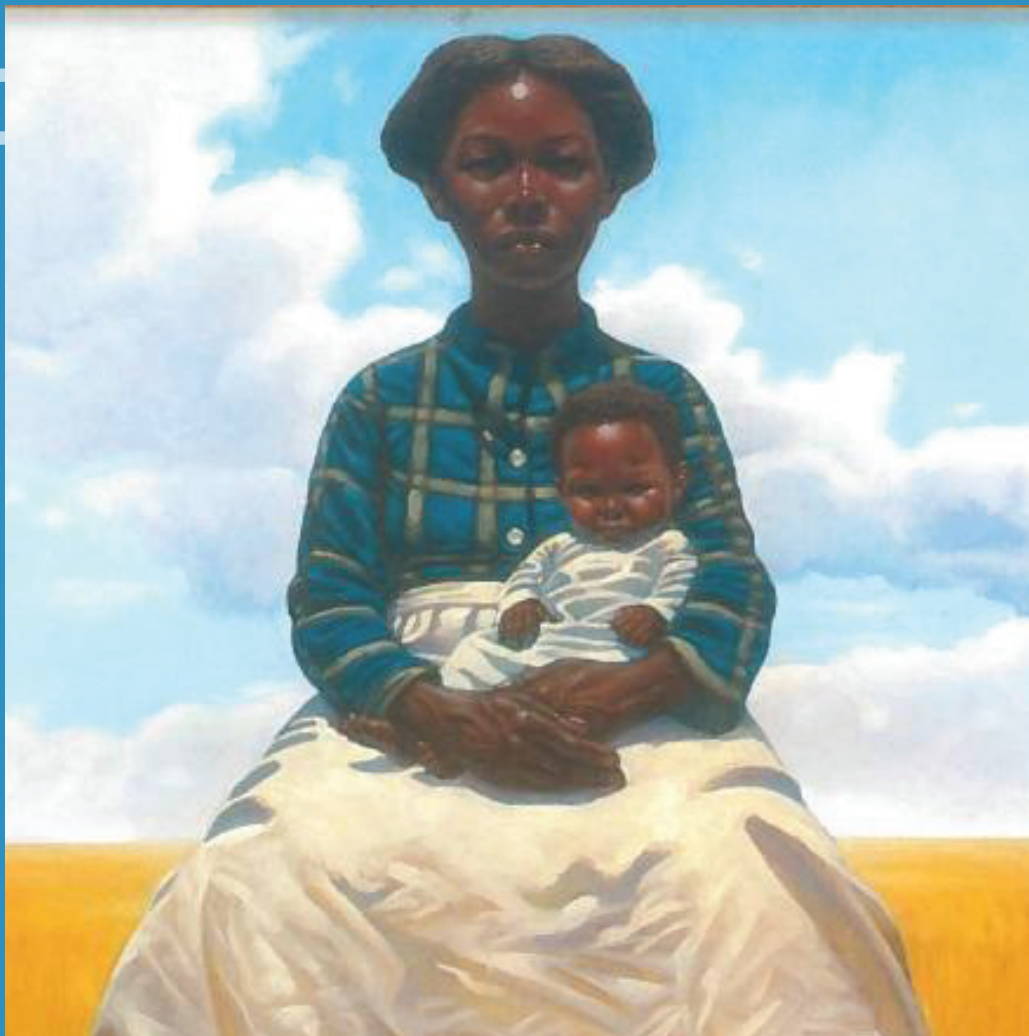


# KADIR NELSON



**2022 Hans Christian Andersen Award**  
USBBY Illustrator Nominee

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# Biography

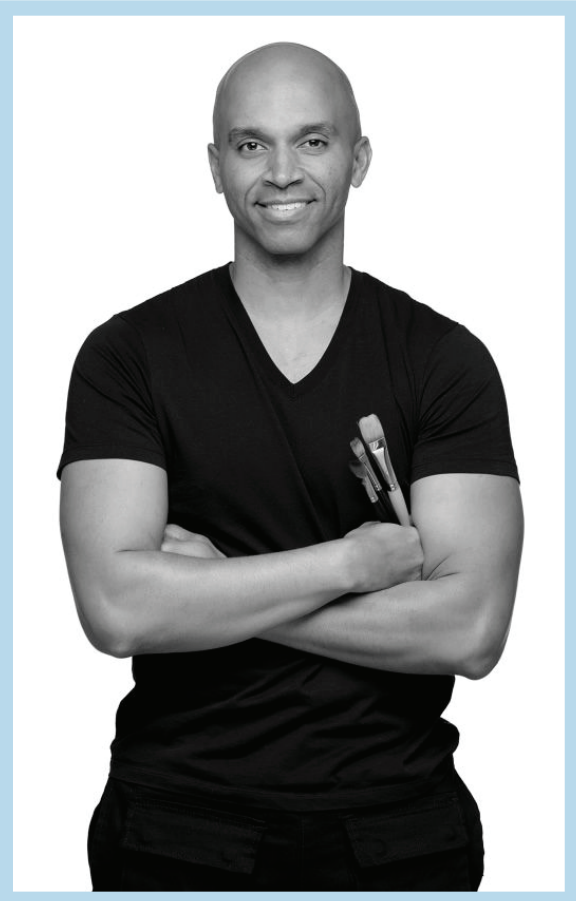


Photo credit: Jungmiwha S. Bullock

Kadir Nelson has been an artist since the age of 3. Born on May 15, 1974 in Washington D.C., Nelson grew up in different cities around the United States, from San Diego, California, to Atlantic City, New Jersey. While drawing was a pastime for Nelson, he never saw himself as a career artist: “When I was a kid, I didn’t necessarily think of a career in the arts... I honestly wanted to be in the NBA, and I wanted to play basketball. Michael Jordan was my hero and I would find images of him and paint them or draw them, and it wasn’t until a little later in my teenage years that I realized I kind of like drawing and painting. I worked at that a lot harder and a lot more than I did on my basketball skills.” (Burke, 2018).

Nelson’s uncle, the artist Michael Morris, took notice of his nephew’s talent and often provided Nelson with pencils and paper. Eventually, Morris became a pivotal mentor in Nelson’s life, and he taught Nelson many of the foundational principles of art, including light, coloring, and perspective, putting him on an early path to artistic success. Nelson also credits his high school art teacher, Sandra Buck, who helped him make the leap to new mediums.

Following his high school training, Nelson received a scholarship to prestigious Pratt Institute, where he had originally planned to study architecture. While there, however, he realized that his first love was illustration, and he switched focus. Upon graduating with honors in 1996, Nelson went to work at the film production company DreamWorks, where the extraordinary quality of his artwork brought him attention throughout the company.

While working on the film *Amistad*, Nelson’s works caught the eye of Debbie Allen, an Emmy-winning choreographer. Allen requested that Nelson illustrate her children’s book, *Brothers of the Knight*, a contemporary retelling of the Brothers Grimm fairy tale, “The Twelve Dancing Princesses,” and this became Nelson’s first published children’s book.

Nelson went on to illustrate more children’s books through the early 2000s, including books by Toya and Spike Lee, Will Smith, Nikki Grimes, and Jerdine Nolen. To date, Nelson has nearly

# Biography

35 published children's books to his credit, including several he has authored. Throughout his career, he has used a variety of mediums from watercolor and collage to the dramatic oil paintings for which he is perhaps best known. His paintings, many created for children's books, hang in the U.S. House of Representatives, National Museum of African American History & Culture, and National Portrait Gallery. Around the world, his work can be found at the Bristol Museum in England; the Citizen's Gallery of Yokohama, Japan; the Center for Culture of Tijuana, Mexico; and the International Olympic Committee in Lausanne, Switzerland. His work has also appeared on magazine covers for *National Geographic* and *The New Yorker*, among other publications, on album covers, and even on iconic U.S. postage stamps.

While the subjects of Nelson's children's book illustrations have ranged from young animals to imaginary giants to majestic scenery, his primary focus has been on Africans and African Americans, as a way for children of color to see themselves represented in books, as well as for all children to acknowledge the diversity of their world. His work has included notable people, including Nobel Peace Prize winners Nelson Mandela and Wangari Maathai; 19th-century U.S. abolitionist Harriet Tubman; groundbreaking U.S. baseball player Jackie Robinson; and Civil Rights hero Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The nature of Nelson's work fosters empathy and understanding which lends itself to being included in many elementary literacy curriculums. Nelson's work "invites readers to become insiders in a culture that may be different from their own." (Sableski, 2015).

Nelson has become one of the most revered creators in the U.S. children's literature community. He has received a growing list of awards from many U.S. organizations including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Society of Illustrators, the Museum of Tolerance, and most notably, the American Library Association, which has chosen his work for numerous awards, including the Caldecott Medal, the highest distinction for a U.S. illustrator of children's literature.

When asked about what he hopes readers will see in his illustrations, he says:

*I have taken on the responsibility of creating artwork that speaks to the strength and inner beauty and outer beauty of people from all over the world. I like to create paintings of people who have overcome diversity but by being excellent or being strong or intelligent or having big hearts to remind people that they share those same qualities. When they see the paintings and feel the spirit of the people I am depicting, they are reminded of that within themselves. It all speaks to the story of the triumph and the hero that lives in all of us. If people take anything away from my work, that's what I hope they take away from it. (Nelson, 2015).*



# Biography

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## Contribution to Literature for Young People



In a career spanning over two decades, Kadir Nelson has created an indelible body of work in treasured books for children. One of the most celebrated U.S. illustrators working today, he is a masterful artist, producing paintings of astonishing impact, beauty, and meaning. Nelson's profound skill and influence on children's literature has been recognized with the highest U.S. honors for children's literature creators, including the 2020 Caldecott Medal and the 2020 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award, for his artwork in *The Undeclared*, written by Kwame Alexander. His range of subjects is remarkable, from the achievements of legendary athletes and activists to small, meaningful moments in everyday family life. Taken together, his work honors the resilience of the human spirit: "With each story, I've made it a point to show the strength, love, and light that dwells within every character and indeed every human being with the hopes of appealing to what Abraham Lincoln described as our better angels." (Nelson, 2012).

From *Blue Sky, White Stars*, written by Sarvinder Naberhaus and illustrated by Kadir Nelson

## Contribution to Literature for Young People



Throughout his career, Nelson has focused in particular on the lives of Africans and African Americans, providing urgently needed opportunities for children of color to find themselves in books and for all children to recognize and celebrate the diversity of the world in which they live. Nelson's art first appeared in 1999 with *Brothers of the*

*Knight*, written by Debbie Allen. In this high-spirited, contemporary urban retelling of the Brothers Grimm fairy tale, "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," written by Debbie Allen and set in New York City, 12 African American brothers in Harlem dance through the evening, leaving holes in their high-top basketball sneakers. With this first title, Nelson's artistic achievement was already clear, in masterfully composed scenes that pulse with kinetic, vibrant joy.

From *Brothers of the Knight*, written by Debbie Allen and illustrated by Kadir Nelson (1999)



Since then, Nelson has put children of African descent at the center of many titles, such as *He's Got the Whole World in His Hand* (2006), based on an African American spiritual song. Here, Nelson focuses on a contemporary African American child, even as he brings in clear connections to the diversity of the whole human family, shown in the child's own drawing of his loved ones.

From *He's Got the Whole World in His Hand* (2006), illustrated by Kadir Nelson



## Contribution to Literature for Young People



Some of Nelson's most celebrated works are sweeping tours through African American history, in titles which he has both written and illustrated. In the multi-award-winning *We Are the Ship* (2009), Nelson presents, in both text and images, the history of Negro Leagues baseball, from the first half of the 20th-century when racist segregation barred African American athletes from playing with whites. *The New York Times* declared that "Nelson's visual narrative is nothing short of magnificent." The U.S. literature journal, *Kirkus Reviews*, underscored how Nelson's dynamic illustrations move readers from specific subjects to larger understanding: "Along with being absolutely riveted by the art, readers will come away with a good picture of the Negro Leaguers' distinctive style of play, as well as an idea of how their excellence challenged the racial attitudes of both their sport and their times."

In *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans* (2011), which also received numerous top national awards including a Corretta Scott King Illustrator Honor, Nelson again combines soaring portraits and scenes with his own text to present a tour through American history, emphasizing the contributions of Black Americans. Called "a tour de force in the career of an author/artist who continues to outdo himself" (Horning, 2011) in the U.S. children's literature journal *The Horn Book*, this title honored not only well-known historical figures, but also the countless, unnamed people who created social change and moved history forward. As Hazel Rochman wrote in her review in *Booklist*, the review journal of the American Library Association, "Nelson effectively captures the roles of ordinary people in landmark events." (Rochman, 2011).

*From Heart and Soul: The Story of American and African Americans, written and illustrated by Kadir Nelson*

## Contribution to Literature for Young People

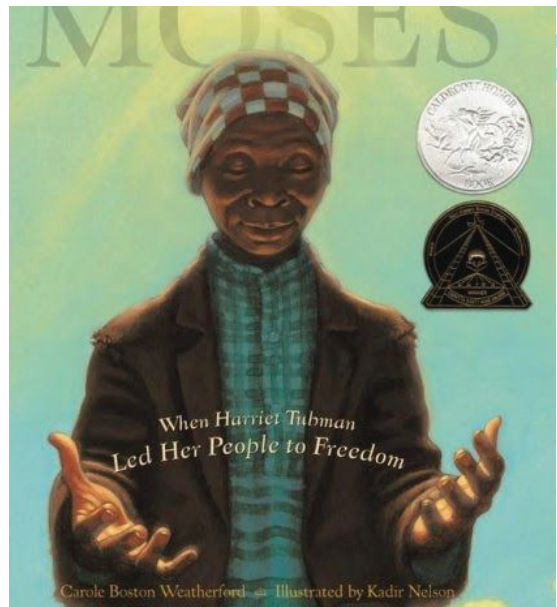


From *Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story of the Underground Railroad*, written by Ellen Levine and illustrated by Kadir Nelson

Nelson's body of work also includes many titles that honor the life of one individual. In his illustrations for Ellen Levine's *Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story of the Underground Railroad*, for which he received a Caldecott Honor, he depicts the true story of a 19th-century African American who escaped enslavement by mailing himself in a box, finding freedom after a harrowing journey. In her *Booklist* review, Ilene Cooper admired Nelson's unusual ability to push beyond mere technical skill and create a sense of living, breathing humans with whom children can connect: "Transcending technique is the humanity Nelson imbues in his characters."

Nelson also received a Caldecott Honor for his riveting, humanizing portraits of Harriet Tubman, who led hundreds of enslaved black Americans to freedom in *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*, written by Carole Boston Weatherford.

Cover of *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*, written by Carole Boston Weatherford and illustrated by Kadir Nelson





# Contribution to Literature for Young People



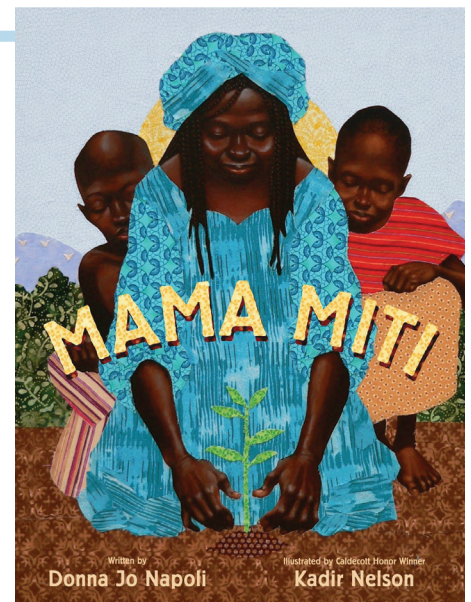
Cover from *Nelson Mandela*, written and illustrated by Kadir Nelson



Interior image from *Nelson Mandela*, written and illustrated by Kadir Nelson

In several titles, Nelson expands his focus to world leaders, most notably in picture book biographies of two Nobel Peace Prize winners: South African Nelson Mandela and Kenyan Wangari Maathai. Both titles, *Nelson Mandela*, written and illustrated by Kadir Nelson, and *Mama Miti*, written by Donna Jo Napoli and illustrated by Kadir Nelson, received wide acclaim and, like so many of Nelson's titles, have been shared in libraries, schools, and homes around the world.

Cover from *Mama Miti*, written by Donna Jo Napoli and illustrated by Kadir Nelson





## Contribution to Literature for Young People

KWAME ALEXANDER ☆ KADIR NELSON  
**THE UNDEFEATED**



Nelson's illustrations in *The Undeclared*, written by Kwame Alexander (2019), earned him a Caldecott Medal, the most prestigious U.S. award for a children's book illustrator, as well as a Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award. Like so much of Nelson's work, these soaring, collective portraits of African Americans who shaped American life help children both vividly imagine lives in the past and also feel their own present place in history's long continuum. Critic and librarian Betsy Bird writes that Nelson's uniquely powerful oil paintings in this title convey an "inner glow, as if the subject's soul is radiating out of their very skin." (Bird, 2019).

Cover from *The Undeclared*, written by Kwame Alexander and illustrated by Kadir Nelson (2019)

## Contribution to Literature for Young People

Upon learning of Nelson's U.S. nomination for the Hans Christian Andersen Award, celebrated Australian author Susanne Gervay sent the following appreciation to the USBBY Nomination Committee:

*Kadir Nelson is one of the great voices of picture books . . . His books open discussion on racial injustice, the battle for equality for Black Americans and for all people of colour. It challenges readers to critically address racism, its consequences, and challenges readers to become advocates of freedom. His picture books have relevance to countries beyond the USA as they reveal the journeys of iconic leaders and their world visions of justice. . . Kadir Nelson's art and ideas live long after reading the final page of his books. His books are recommended in ethics and anti-racist school programs and in parent book selections in bookshops in Australia and New Zealand.*

Kadir Nelson's work guides readers to move from the specific to the most universal, shared human experience. Through sheer mastery of technique and the irrefutable beauty with which he imbues his subjects, Nelson inspires readers to learn about the past and take action towards a more just, inclusive future. In his acceptance speech for the Coretta Scott King Award for his work in *The Undefeated*, Nelson emphasized that he hopes his work will move people around the globe: "As we consider the present moment, I feel more than ever that no time is better suited for using our creativity to spread and make something beautiful and share it with the world . . . Shine a light on all that is good in us, and work to brighten the dimmer places in our hearts and minds so that we may find peace in ourselves and with one another."

# Contribution to Literature for Young People

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# Kadir Nelson

by Kwame Alexander

Kadir Nelson is the winner of the 2020 Caldecott Medal and the 2020 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award for *The Undefeated*, written by Kwame Alexander, who also won a Newbery Honor for the book’s text. Here, Alexander pays tribute to his creative collaborator.

I gave my father, a children’s literature scholar, the Newbery Honor plaque for *The Undefeated*...he hung it on his living room wall, and gives everyone who visits a lecture on the book and the history of the award...He is the smartest man I know...personally...When he talks, you listen...and always learn...I find him sometimes enigmatic...His words, artfully measured...each sentence lingering on the edge of a cliff...and you just hang on...ready to soar...waiting to hear...what he has to say...which is always interesting and enlightening

The second smartest man I know is Kadir Nelson...his words, too, are measured...the first time I heard him speak was in the desert...at a conference of booksellers and other bookish professionals...I thought him shy...reticent, even...during the course of his hour-long conversation he maybe uttered a thousand words...less than one word every four seconds...which is not a lot...but I, like every other attendee, hung on...waiting to hear...what he had to say...which was always interesting and enlightening



Kwame Alexander is the Innovator in Residence at the American School of London and the founding editor of Versify, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, which published *The Undefeated*. He won the Newbery Medal for *The Crossover* (Houghton).

## Appreciation: “Kadir Nelson” by Kwame Alexander in *The Horn Book*

The *Undeclared*. Illustration by Kadir Nelson.  
© 2019 by Kadir Nelson, Inc.



From *The Undeclared*.

On the flip side...Kadir can't stop talking...on canvas...each stroke, a thousand words...each painting, a scopious soliloquy full of color and culture...The first time I was captivated by his work was in *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands*...the second time, *Just the Two of Us* by Will Smith...the third, in *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led her People to Freedom* by Carole Boston Weatherford...the images in these books centering Black children and families and history were familial and ebullient...there was nothing hesitant about his art... nothing shy...it boldly dove off the edge of the cliff and soared

I started writing *The Undeclared* in 2008...I finished it in 2016...Eight years to get it right...three hundred words... that's less than one word every four days...I am my father's child...So, when Margaret Raymo decided this measured poem should be a children's book, we both knew who had to illustrate it...By this time, Kadir Nelson was a household name...among child and adult readers of Black history... among children's literature fans and professionals...among librarians...among portrait art aficionados...among postal stamp collectors...among *The New Yorker* subscribers...among Black people...among lovers of Black people...so he was busy...which meant it was highly unlikely he would have the time to take on another project...especially since he'd recently decided to focus on illustrating his own work

## Appreciation: “Kadir Nelson” by Kwame Alexander in *The Horn Book*

There is an African proverb that says *No matter how full the river, it still wants to grow*...When I got the call that Kadir wanted to illustrate *The Undefeated* I felt like Serena Williams...on the biggest stage...Wimbledon...and my partner, Venus, was about to serve for match point...When I commented that one of his early sketches for my manuscript needed to be “fixed” and he sent back an unabashed note that simply read *Tell Kwame I didn't give him any notes on his poem*, I realized that he was, in fact, the Serena, on this doubles team...and that he was right

These days, Kadir and I talk a lot...we reminisce over our entente...he lets me peek at his works-in-progress...we talk about the Caldecott...and the Newbery...and the Coretta Scott King Award...and Versify...and our hopes and dreams for America...and our undying commitment to the children...and to Black history...and our families...and the Lakers...and in between the remembrances...and the laughter...and the writing...and the painting...there is always talk of the next river...of another book together...which I would happily dive into...again...and again...and again...which my father says would be a very smart thing to do...I agree. ■



Kadir Nelson (left) and Kwame Alexander.

Photo: MXBloomFilms.



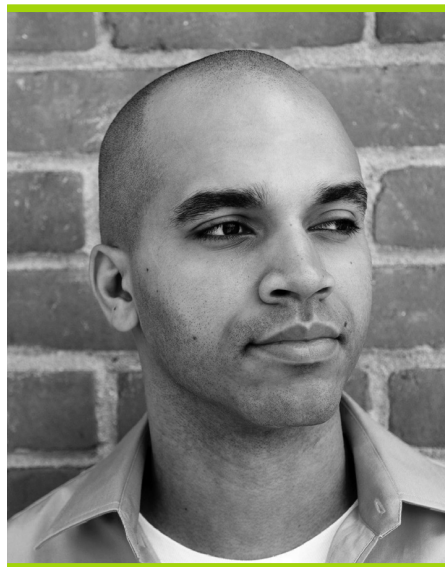
Appreciation: “Celebrating the Hero in All of Us: An Interview with Kadir Nelson,” by Mary-Kate Sableski, Jackie Marshall Arnold, and Donna Sayers Adomat in *Journal of Children’s Literature*

# Celebrating the Hero in All of Us: An Interview With Kadir Nelson

MARY-KATE SABLESKI, JACKIE MARSHALL ARNOLD, & DONNA SAYERS ADOMAT

This article discusses the work of author-illustrator Kadir Nelson, who is the featured speaker for the 2015 Children’s Literature Assembly Breakfast.

**BOOKS PROVIDE AN** opportunity through which children can learn what it means to be in the world and to respond flexibly and creatively to a diverse range of situations. Author/illustrator Kadir Nelson creates books that provide these opportunities for readers of all ages. A dominant theme in current conversations surrounding children’s literature includes the representation of diversity in books, as well as in the authors and awards for children’s books. Nelson writes through his own diverse lens, inviting readers to become insiders in a culture and time that may be different from their own.



Kadir Nelson

Nelson began drawing at age 3 and continued to develop his skills throughout his childhood. He attended the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York; graduated with

honors; and launched his career as a professional artist. In addition to writing and illustrating many award-winning books, he has been commissioned by individuals and companies, such as Coca-Cola, Major League Baseball, and the United States Postal Service. Nelson also created the panoramic portrait cover for Michael Jackson’s (2010) posthumous album, *Michael*, as well as the conceptual artwork for Steven Spielberg’s (1997) film *Amistad*.

Nelson (2013b) is the author/illustrator of powerful books, such as *Nelson Mandela*, which was named a Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Book in 2014. In 2007 and 2008,

he won back-to-back Caldecott Medal Honor Book awards for his breathtaking illustrations in *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* by Carole Boston

## Appreciation: “Celebrating the Hero in All of Us: An Interview with Kadir Nelson,” by Mary-Kate Sableski, Jackie Marshall Arnold, and Donna Sayers Adomat in *Journal of Children’s Literature*

Weatherford (2006) and *Henry’s Freedom Box: A True Story From the Underground Railroad* by Ellen Levine (2007).

In 2008, Nelson published *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*, which won multiple awards, including a Coretta Scott King Author Award and a Robert F. Sibert Medal, both in 2009. The title of the book was taken from a quote by Rube Foster, who stated, “we are the ship,...all else the sea” (p. 9), during the historic time in which the African American baseball players came together to form the Negro National Baseball League. Nelson’s book weaves memories and details to give tribute to the players, coaches, and managers involved in the Negro League.

Nelson (2013a) went on to publish *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans*, narrated by an African American woman whose voice was inspired by Nelson’s maternal grandmother. The actress, Debbie Allen, provides an important bridge between family history and the critical need for the inclusion of African American history in our American story.

*Baby Bear* was Nelson’s (2014) first foray into the genre of fiction. The book may appear to be a simple story of a young bear trying to find his way home through the woods, but on a deeper level, it is a metaphorical story of helping readers trust their hearts and their paths, and in the end, they find their way home. These gorgeous illustrations lead you down the path and through the story.

In his most recent work, Nelson (2015) addresses the question, “What will grow from the seeds you plant?” *If You Plant a Seed* explores that literal and metaphorical question as a rabbit and a mouse plant seeds together and watch what grows. When faced with a road of sharing and a road of selfishness, which one will you choose?

Nelson’s books offer a chance for teachers and their students to see the possibilities and opportunities they have to change the world. Themes of diversity, inclusiveness, historical relevance, and the struggles of the human condition can be found woven throughout his work. Nelson’s paintings are both realistic and imaginative and invite readers to relate to them in a deeply personal way. His work is beloved by many, as evidenced by the enthusiastic reactions and sense of anticipation that we experienced in advance of his attendance at the Children’s Literature Assembly (CLA) Breakfast in 2015. We were honored to have the opportunity to speak with him about his work.

**CLA** What do you enjoy most about writing for children?

**KN** I would say for me the most enjoyable part is the discovery process. Writing is something that is rather new for me. I am an artist by trade. I have been illustrating books for a number of years, and I did not start writing until I had already illustrated maybe 10 or 12 books. Writing was a bit of a challenge for me, but discovering how to write and seeing the story unfold, not only with words but later with pictures, I think is really the most fun part of it because it is kind of a new thing for me. When the book is finally finished, I also really enjoy the fact that the kids get to discover the artwork—not only kids but readers of all ages. They get to discover the story and in their own way, so it is kind of twofold. I get to discover it as I am working on it, and they get to discover it as they read the story.

**CLA** Are there echoes of other work, other illustrators, or authors that have come through in your books?

**KN** There are a number of artists, particularly illustrators, that I looked at very early on in my career, like Jerry Pinkney, Chris Van Allsburg, and Maurice Sendak. I was really looking at the way they told stories visually. As far as writing style, there are several other writers whom I really like, but those are some of the artists that I looked to early on that really caught my eye. I really loved the way that they told stories. I really kind of developed my writing style on my own. My biggest influence on *We Are the Ship* was Ken Burns. He did a book called *Baseball: An Illustrated History* [Ward & Burns, 1994] that I really loved. Other than that, I did not really have big influences just because I was not really a writer, so I did not look to other writers for writing. I based the writing for *We Are the Ship* on what I learned in high school with the practice of writing essays. *We Are the Ship* is a collection of essays, which happen to be chapters about different parts of the experiences of baseball players in the Negro Leagues.

**CLA** Have the reactions of any of the children who have read your books surprised you or led you in a different direction?

**KN** It is interesting to see how interested they are in subject matter, and when they are, they pay such close attention to it. They want to make sure that I have done my homework, that I have not made any mistakes. If I have made a mistake, they will be eager to point it out or ask questions about it. In *Heart and Soul*, I had spoken to a class, and one of the kids pointed out that in one of the pictures, there was a slave ship and alongside the slave

**Appreciation: “Celebrating the Hero in All of Us: An Interview with Kadir Nelson,”**  
by Mary-Kate Sableski, Jackie Marshall Arnold, and Donna Sayers Adomat in  
*Journal of Children’s Literature*



ship were some seagulls who were flying. He pointed out the fact that birds were free and the people on the boat were not free. That was certainly in my mind when I was painting it, but I did not think that the kids would get that or that they would be so explicit about seeing that dynamic between the two. I mean, those types of things are really interesting. Children have very full minds. They do not have the experiences we have, but they can certainly understand the human condition. It is really amazing to see how full the children’s minds are.

**CLA** You mentioned that you were an illustrator first and have come to the writing component of it later. Do you enjoy both illustrating and writing your books, or would you prefer just illustrating?

**KN** I prefer to write as well as illustrate. It is more complete for me. I can see the whole thing, and it is not something I have to go back to the author and ask questions, such as what he or she was thinking, or to ask if we mind taking some words out here or there because the pictures are filling up the page. I have more control over it, and I find that to be much more rewarding.

**CLA** What role do you see your books playing in the classroom?

**KN** Well, I have heard that at least *We Are the Ship* has been used as a supplement to the curriculum or lesson plans, and I think that is really great. A lot of the books I have done have been historically based, so it makes sense

in many cases to use them to supplement what teachers are doing in the classroom or what children are learning. Also, the fact that it is an introduction of artwork to children, and it is something that is very personal to them. They get to read it before they go to bed, or read it in the classroom, and it is another way of telling a story. I am all for the books being used in that way, to supplement the lesson plans. It helps bring it home, and also it becomes more interesting and more fun—when you are learning about slavery, for instance, and the kids get to read about Henry Box Brown. It is a really interesting story that ties it all together and in a new way that you may not be able to do with textbooks.

**CLA** Why do you like to write for children?

**KN** I do not necessarily feel that I am writing for children. I am just trying to write a really good story, and children’s books allow me to do what I really love to do, which is to tell stories, not only with pictures but with words as well. It is a really great platform to do that. It happens that this platform is so available or is made specifically for children, but I mean the books I do are for everybody. I think they are a bit more sophisticated than some of the books that are for the much younger children, but I think children of all ages and backgrounds are able to understand or relate or enjoy the books that I do.

**CLA** So, what about revision? Tell us about how you revise.

**KN** Well, there is a lot. There is always revision with the manuscript. Down to when it is almost finally turned in because once all the artwork is finished and sometimes you put the text on top of it and you kind of weave them together, sometimes you will see that you might need something or that you might need to take something away. But when it comes to the artwork, the revision is mostly done in the early stages with sketches. There is really not much revision once it is gone to final, because we have a clear idea of where everything is going to be at that point. I would say most of the revision happens on the manuscript, because that is not as easy. It was not always as easy for me to write the manuscript, so there is always a bit of back and forth.

**CLA** From where do your ideas originate? How do you get the ideas or the starts for your books?

**KN** Well, some of the ideas come from the publisher. Sometimes they will say, “I would like to see a book on Nelson Mandela,” for instance. But sometimes it is something that I am very interested in independently, like

## Appreciation: “Celebrating the Hero in All of Us: An Interview with Kadir Nelson,” by Mary-Kate Sableski, Jackie Marshall Arnold, and Donna Sayers Adomat in *Journal of Children’s Literature*

what about *Baby Bear*, that might come from life experiences or where I am in my life or if I am feeling like I want to do something that speaks to maybe a spiritual philosophy or just a nuts-and-bolts kind of a thing. I might think, Well, it might be a good idea to write a story about the Negro Leagues or my family history. It just depends on where my head is. I cannot say that I have a big laundry list of things I would like to do. It is more about what is in front of me at the moment.

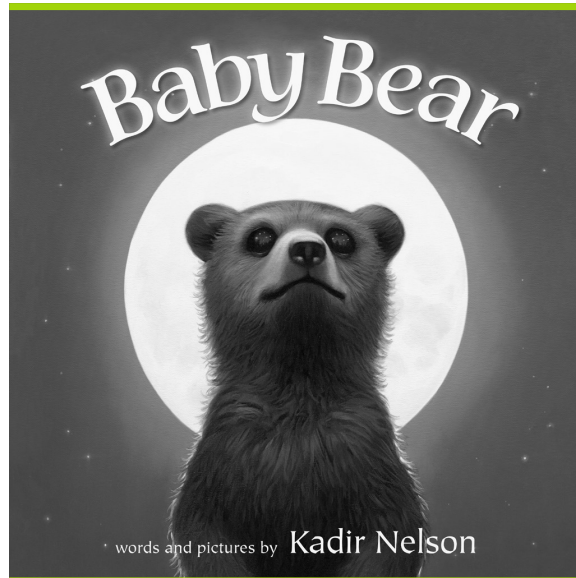
**CLA** *Baby Bear* is a beautiful book, and I love that it is a little different from what you had done before. Along those lines, how has your work changed from your first book to your most recent book?

**KN** Well, I guess one thing is I was illustrating for other authors when I first started out. And my style was a bit more exaggerated and cartoony, I would say. The medium was different. I was using watercolor, pencil, and oil or gouache. There was a pretty heavy line around the artwork, which made it a little bit more linear and cartoony. Over the years, I started to move away from that style to a more painterly style, where I was working on canvas or on different surfaces that allowed the artwork to look a bit more realistic, and the line disappeared. It was more about paint and composition and brushstrokes and what have you. I guess that would be the major difference between what my work looks like now and when I began.

**CLA** Can you tell us about your newest book and how you got that idea?

**KN** The book *If You Plant a Seed* is about cause and effect. If you do this, then this will happen. If you do that, this will happen. And if you plant a carrot seed, then you will get a carrot. And if you plant a tomato seed, then you get a tomato. *If You Plant a Seed* then goes into more of a concept of if you plant a seed of selfishness, then you will be planting the fruits of selfishness. Then, on the flip side of it, if you plant a seed of kindness, then the fruits of kindness are very sweet. So, I was pretty much making the case that you reap what you sow, that old, very old parable. And I thought it would be a very fun and sweet way to tell the story with this little duo of the rabbit and the mouse. Kids enjoy eating but then do not always like to share and then experience the outcomes of not sharing with your neighbors. So, I thought it was a really cool and fun story.

**CLA** The We Need Diverse Books movement is getting a lot of really great publicity. Do you have any feelings on that movement and implications for children’s literature?



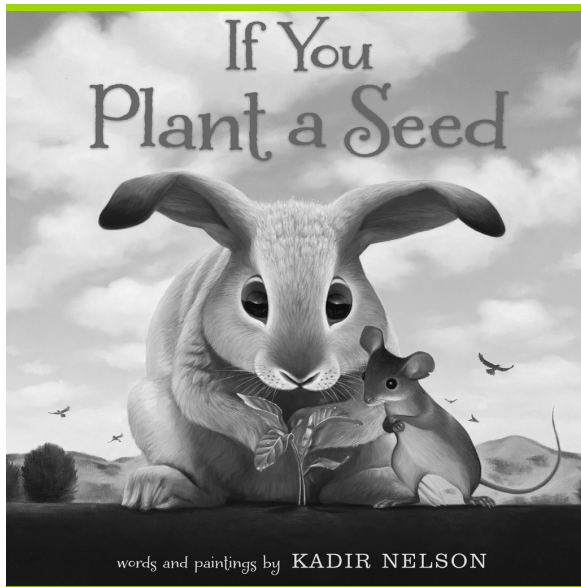
**KN** Oh, I think it is a great idea. I mean, there are more diverse books available now than when I was a kid. I do not remember any, but I think it is still behind a curve here. I think there was something last year or the year before, where there were some numbers put out as far as how many diverse books there were. Diversity as a market—children’s book market—it was pretty dramatic the amount of books that really were not available that spoke to children who are of other backgrounds—African American or Latino. And, you know, it is certainly important for children to be able to see themselves in the books, in the stories. I was not really a big reader as a kid, and that may be part of the reason, because I did not relate so much with the characters in the books that I was reading. I certainly remember there were monsters and there were Dr. Seuss books and *See Jane Run*, or what have you. No one looked like the kids in my neighborhood in those books. That certainly may have contributed to that. So, I am glad to see that there is a movement that is part of a conversation. We should get the ball rolling on that even faster, because I think it is very important.

**CLA** What do you think makes a piece of children’s literature truly diverse?

**KN** I would say that the books would be reflective of what kids look like all over the country and what they are going through. Some of these areas are very specific and perhaps wouldn’t sell as many books as some of the other, more popular books. But, I mean, kids who are from different racial backgrounds, economic backgrounds, kids who are perhaps disabled face different challenges. We are not used



**Appreciation: “Celebrating the Hero in All of Us: An Interview with Kadir Nelson,”  
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*Journal of Children’s Literature***



to seeing that in children’s books. I think that is a really great place to start.

**CLA** Should a person, if they are going to represent someone from a different background or from a particular culture, be of that culture? Should someone be an insider or a member of the culture before he or she should represent that culture?

**KN** I think that would certainly help. I mean, if you are from a very specific culture and are speaking about that culture, you really have to know what you are speaking about inside and out. You need to at least have some type of contact or somehow have been immersed in that culture to speak to it. In my experience, that certainly helps. If I am doing a book about a kid in Utah or part of the Mormon culture, I would have to really know that culture inside and out before I could tell that story. I do not think it is necessary to be from Utah and part of that culture, but I certainly have to know about it to speak about it. It is not a prerequisite, but I would say that to have insider knowledge certainly helps.

**CLA** So many of your books are about people of diversity. Do you feel like you set out to write books of diversity, or did it just happen?

**KN** I think it was perhaps a combination of the two. I am African American, and I grew up in African American culture, so I am very familiar with that story. And, you know, we all have our stories. I mean, everyone has their

family stories, we have cultural stories, and so forth. I really love that story, and I like to talk about it, celebrate it—one because I love it but also because I felt like I was someone who could tell it confidently, having been immersed in that culture. I mean, I think it is a combination of the two. I do not know if I set out to do it specifically, but I knew that I could, and I wanted to tell that story.

**CLA** Have you been able to meet personally any of the individuals you have written about in your books?

**KN** Well, with *We Are the Ship*, I got to meet a lot of really great people who were in the baseball world—the Negro League baseball world—like Monte Irvin, Hank Aaron, and Willie Mays, as well as some of the owners of baseball teams; Jackie Robinson’s daughter, Sharon Robinson; and his widow, Rachel Robinson. I got to meet them and spend time with them. I mean, that was and continues to be a really great experience, to have been immersed in that world for so long and for it to continue to have legs. I mean, I do not know any other way I would have been able to meet Hank Aaron and his family or go to baseball games and meet people like Buck O’Neil, who was a really great storyteller and human being. I, of course, was able to meet and become friends with Debbie Allen as a result of working on a film with her called *Amistad*, but we ended up striking up a friendship and have become really great friends, and it really is a result of working in children’s books. And these are the things that I had not really imagined would happen. I just was telling stories and creating paintings, and as a result of the love of doing that, many serendipitous experiences came about like that.

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**“I have taken on the responsibility of creating artwork that speaks to the strengths and inner beauty and outer beauty of people from all over the world.”**

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**CLA** What would you like to share with us about what you want others to know about your books?

**KN** I have taken on the responsibility of creating artwork that speaks to the strength and inner beauty and outer beauty of people from all over the world. I like to create paintings of people who have overcome diversity but by being excellent or being strong or intelligent or having big hearts to remind people that they share those same

## Appreciation: “Celebrating the Hero in All of Us: An Interview with Kadir Nelson,” by Mary-Kate Sableski, Jackie Marshall Arnold, and Donna Sayers Adomat in *Journal of Children’s Literature*

qualities. When they see the paintings and feel the spirit of the people I am depicting, they are reminded of that within themselves. It all speaks to the story of the triumph and the hero that lives in all of us. If people take anything away from my work, that’s what I hope they take away from it. ■

We so look forward to hearing Nelson speak at the CLA Breakfast at the National Council of Teachers of English annual meeting, where he will share his award-winning work and spotlight his new book, *If You Plant a Seed*. Special thanks to HarperCollins for its support of our interview and Nelson’s attendance at the CLA Breakfast in Minneapolis.

*Mary-Kate Sableski is an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education in the School of Education and Health Sciences at the University of*

*Dayton, Dayton, Ohio. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy methods and literacy intervention and assessment. Her research focus is on instructional support for struggling readers. email: msableski1@udayton.edu*

*Jackie Marshall Arnold is an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education in the School of Education and Health Sciences at the University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy methods and children’s literature, with a research focus on professional development to support best practice literacy instruction. email: jarnold1@udayton.edu*

*Donna Sayers Adomat is an associate professor in the Department of Literacy, Culture, and Language Education in the School of Education at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in children’s and young adult literature, as well as literacy methods courses. email: dadomat@indiana.edu*

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Nelson, K. (2013a). *Heart and soul: The story of America and African Americans*. New York, NY: Balzer + Bray.

Nelson, K. (2013b). *Nelson Mandela*. New York, NY: Katherine Tegen.  
Nelson, K. (2014). *Baby Bear*. New York, NY: Balzer + Bray.  
Nelson, K. (2015). *If you plant a seed*. New York, NY: Balzer + Bray.  
Weatherford, C.B. (2006). *Moses: When Harriet Tubman led her people to freedom*. (K. Nelson, Illus.). New York, NY: Hyperion.



# Awards and Distinctions

## Caldecott

(Annual U.S. award administered by the American Library Association)

### Medal Winner

2020 *The Undefeated*

### Honor Winner

2008 *Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad*

2007 *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*

## Coretta Scott King Award

(Annual U.S. award administered by the American Library Association)

### CSK Illustrator Award

2005 *Ellington Was Not a Street*

### CSK Illustrator Honor

2004 *Thunder Rose*

2007 *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*

2009 *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*

2012 *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans*

2013 *I Have a Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr.*

2014 *Nelson Mandela*

### CSK Author Award

2009 *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*

2012 *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*

## Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal

(Annual U.S. award administered by the American Library Association)

2009 *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*

# Awards and Distinctions

## New York Times Best Illustrated Books

(Annual list of most notable children's book art published in the U.S.; administered by *The New York Times*)

- 2008 *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*
- 2013 *Nelson Mandela*

## NAACP Image Awards

(Annual list to honor outstanding contributions to arts and literature, administered by U.S.-based National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)

- 2002 *Just The Two of Us*
- 2007 *Moses*
- 2009 *We Are the Ship*
- 2012 *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans*
- 2014 *Nelson Mandela*
- 2016 *If You Plant a Seed*

## Society of Illustrators

(Annual awards for most distinguished illustration, administered by The Society of Illustrators, a national, U.S. organization devoted to promoting the art of illustration)

- 2011 Silver Medal of Original Art for *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans*
- 2014 Hamilton King Award for best illustration in exhibition for *Nelson Mandela*

## Additional Awards

- 2005 Once Upon a Book Award, Museum of Tolerance for *Ellington Was Not a Street*

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Allen, Debbie and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2000). *Dancing in the Wings*. Penguin/Dial.

Smith, Will and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2001). *Just the Two of Us*. Scholastic.

Lee, Spike and Tonya and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2002). *Please, Baby, Please*. Simon & Schuster.

Grimes, Nikki and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2002). *Under the Christmas Tree*. HarperCollins.

Grifalconi, Ann and illustrated by Kadir Nelson (2002). *The Village that Vanished*. Penguin/Dial.

Nolen, Jerdine and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2003). *Thunder Rose*. Harcourt.

Shange, Ntozake and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2004). *Ellington Was Not a Street*. Simon & Schuster.

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Richardson, Charisse and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2005). *The Real Slam Dunk*. Penguin/Dial.

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Nolen, Jerdine and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2005). *Hewitt Anderson's Great Big Life*. Simon & Schuster.

Lee, Spike and Tonya and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2005). *Please, Puppy, Please*. Simon & Schuster.

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- Levine, Ellen and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2007). *Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad*. Scholastic.
- Jordan, Deloris with introduction by Michael Jordan and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2007). *Michael's Golden Rules*. Simon & Schuster.
- Nelson, Kadir with foreword by Hank Aaron. (2008). *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*. Hyperion/Jump at the Sun.
- Rappaport, Doreen and illustrated by Kadir Nelson (2008). *Abe's Honest Words*. Hyperion/Jump at the Sun.
- Obama, Barack (quotes by) and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2009). *Change Has Come: An Artist Celebrates Our American Spirit*. Simon & Schuster.
- Shange, Ntozake and illustrated by Kadir Nelson (2009). *Coretta Scott*. HarperCollins/Katherine Tegen.
- Robinson, Sharon and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2009). *Testing the Ice: A True Story About Jackie Robinson*. Scholastic.
- Staines, Bill (song lyrics by) and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2009). *All God's Critters*. Simon & Schuster.
- Napoli, Donna Jo and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2010). *Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya*. Simon & Schuster/Paula Wiseman Books.
- Peña, Matt de la and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2011). *A Nation's Hope: The Story of Boxing Legend Joe Louis*. Penguin/Dial Books.
- King, Martin Luther Jr. and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2012). *I Have a Dream*. Random House/Schwartz & Wade.
- Nelson, Kadir. (2013). *Nelson Mandela*. HarperCollins.
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Alexander, Kwame and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2019). *The Undefeated*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Smith, James Otis and illustrated by Kadir Nelson. (2020). *Black Heroes of the Wild West*. TOON Books.

# Translations

## *Salt in His Shoes* (2000)

- Chinese: 鞋子裡的鹽 : 麥克·喬登 / Xie zi li de yan : mai ke.qiao deng.
- Korean: 마이클 조던과 운동화 속의 소금.
- Japanese: マイケル・ジョーダン : バスケットボールの神様の少年時代.

## *Just the Two of Us* (2001)

- Portuguese: Só tu e eu.

## *Please, Puppy, Please* (2005)

- Spanish: Por favor, perrito, por favor.

## *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* (2006)

- Chinese: 自由之路 : 黑人摩西 : 海莉·塔布曼的故事 / Zi you zhi lu : hei ren mo xi : hai li. ta bu man de gu shi.
- Korean: 모세 : 세상을 바꾼 용감한 여성 해리엇 터브먼.
- Japanese: ハリエットの道.

## *Henry's Freedom Box* (2007)

- Chinese: 亨利的自由之箱 / Hengli de zi you zhi xiang.
- Korean: 헨리의 자유 상자 / Henri ũi chayu sangja.
- French: Libre, le long voyage d'Henri: une histoire vraie.
- Japanese: ワンガリ・マータイさんとケニアの木々.

## *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball* (2008)

- Korean: 위대한 야구 이야기.

## *Abe's Honest Words* (2008)

- French: Abraham Lincoln : l'homme qui a aboli l'esclavage aux États-Unis.
- Japanese: リンカーン大統領のせいじつなことば : エイブラハム・リンカーンの生涯.

## *Mama Miti* (2010)

- Chinese: 米蒂媽媽 / Mi di ma ma.
- Japanese: ワンガリ・マータイさんとケニアの木々.



Japanese edition



# Translations

## *I Have a Dream* (2012)

- French: I have a dream.
- Japanese: わたしには夢がある。

## *Nelson Mandela* (2013)

- French: Nelson Mandela.
- Japanese: ネルソン・マンデラ.
- Spanish: Nelson Mandela.
- Catalan: Nelson Mandela.

## *Baby Bear* (2014)

- Korean: 아기 곰.

## *If You Plant a Seed* (2015)

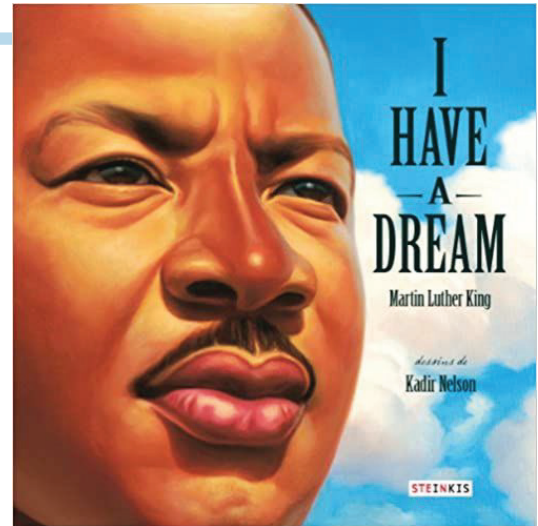
- Korean: 씨앗을 심으면.
- French: Avec un grain d'amitié.
- Persian: Chī bikkāram? chī bardāram?.

## *Blue Sky, White Stars* (2017)

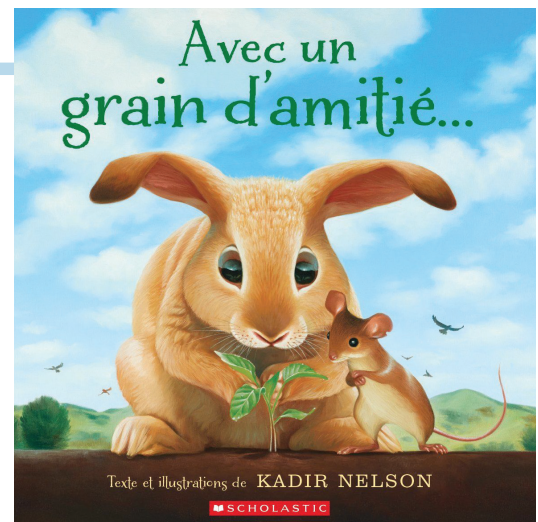
- Spanish: Un cielo azul blanca estrellas.

## *Undefeated* (2019)

- French: Invaincus.



French edition



French edition

KWAME ALEXANDER ☆ KADIR NELSON

## INVAINCUS



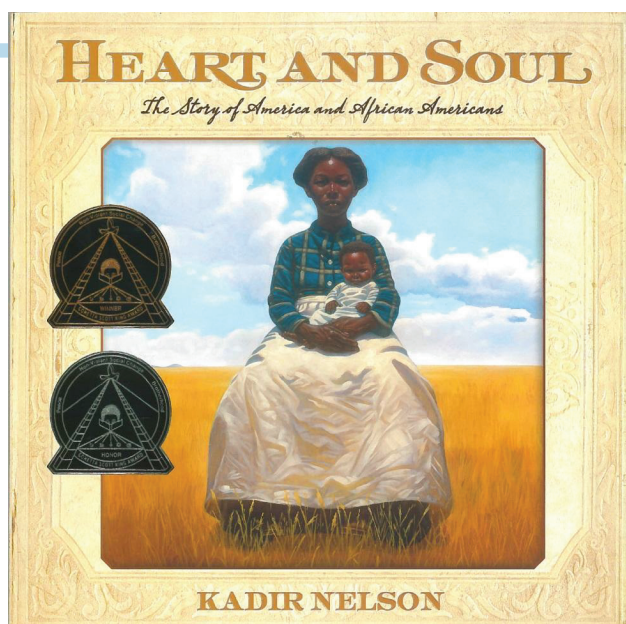
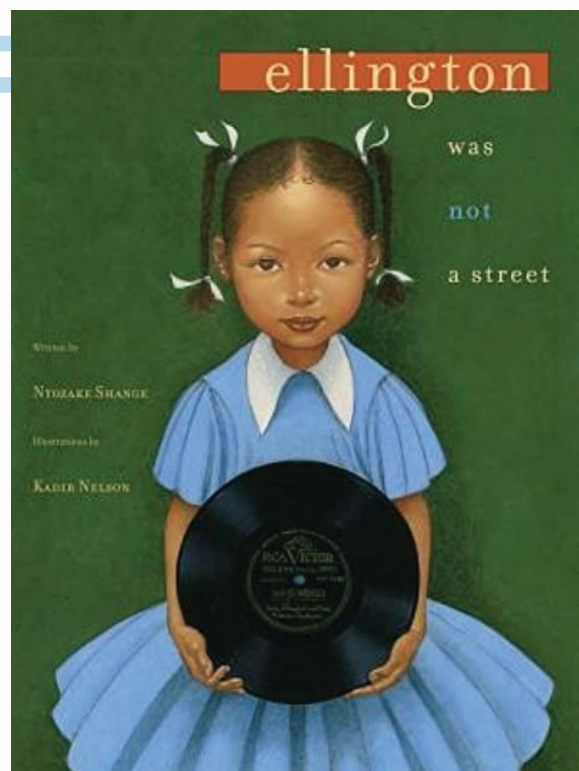
French edition

# Ten Most Important Titles

## *Ellington Was Not a Street*

Written by Ntozake Shange; illustrated by Kadir Nelson

- (2004) Simon & Schuster for Young Children
- (2005) Weston Woods, audiobook DVD
- (2012) Weston Woods, downloadable MP3 audiobook



## *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans*

Written by Ellen Levine; illustrated by Kadir Nelson

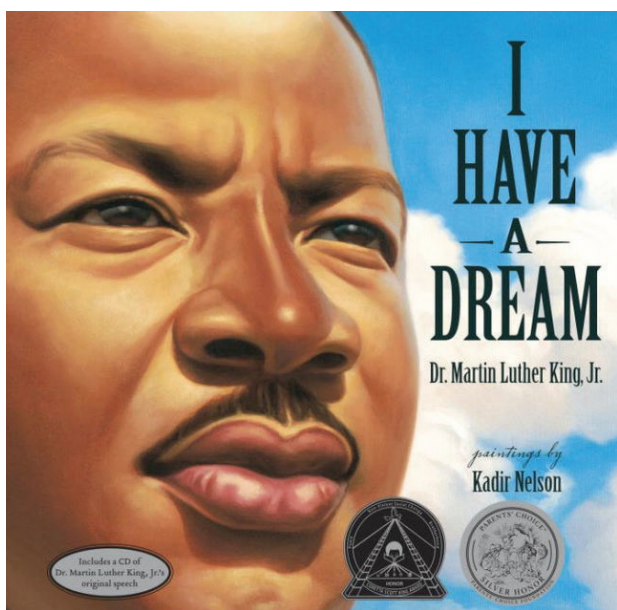
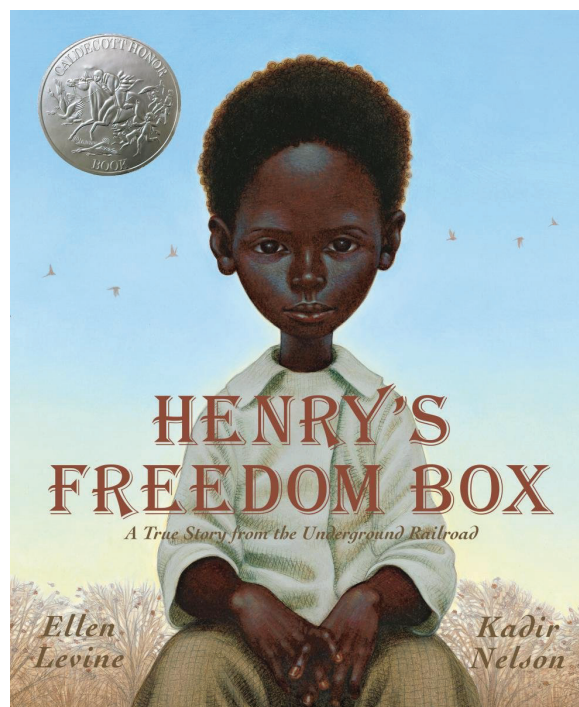
- (2011) Balzer + Bray, an imprint of HarperCollins
- (2011) HarperAudio, audiobook
- (2013) HarperCollins, paperback
- (2013) Turtleback, hardcover
- (2020) HarperCollins, e-book

# Ten Most Important Titles

## *Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad*

Written by Ellen Levine; illustrated by Kadir Nelson

- (2007) Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic, Inc.
- (2008) Scholastic, Inc., paperback
- (2009) Weston Woods, CD audiobook
- (2011) Weston Woods, mixed-media edition
- (2012) Weston Woods, downloadable MP3 audiobook
- (2016) Scholastic Inc., e-book



## *I Have a Dream*

Written by Martin Luther King, Jr.;  
illustrated Kadir Nelson

- (2012) Schwartz and Wade, an imprint of Random House Children's Books
- (2012) Random House Children's Books, book and CD
- (2012) Random House Children's Books, e-book



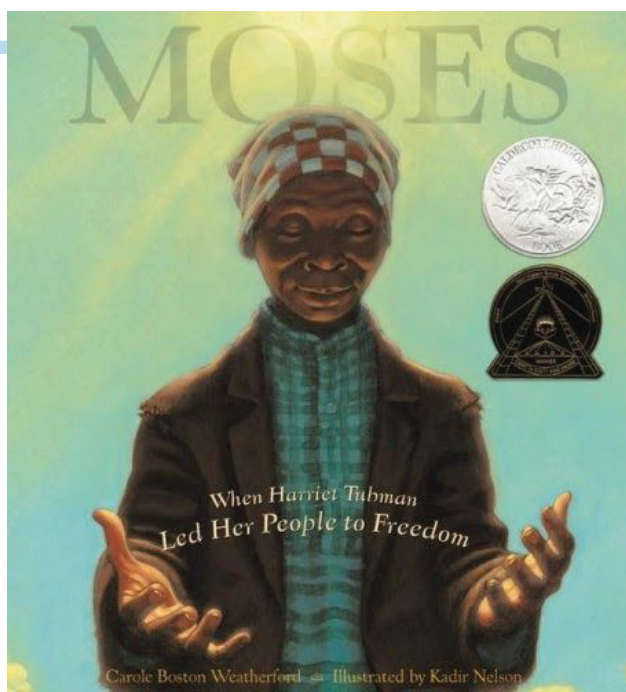
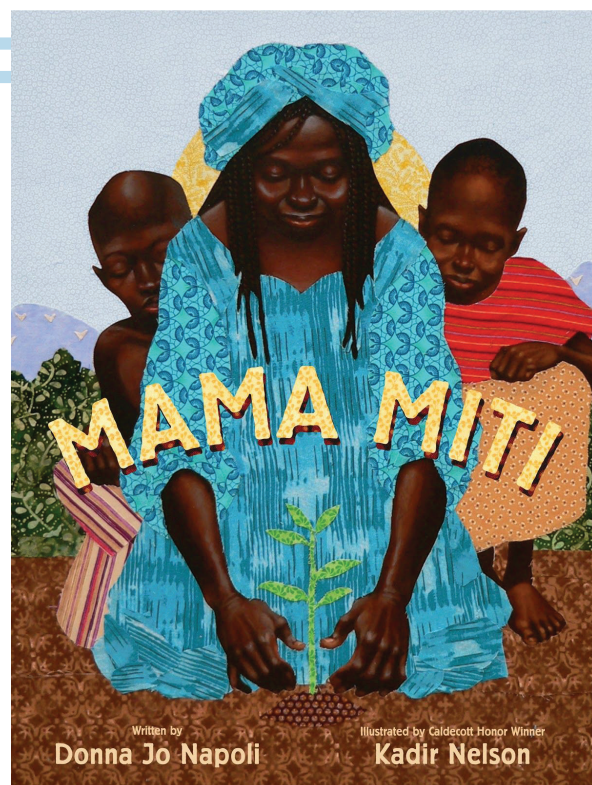
# Ten Most Important Titles

## ***Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya***

Written by Donna Jo Napoli; illustrated by Kadir Nelson

(2010) Paula Wiseman Books, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing

(2012) Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, e-book



## ***Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom***

Written by Carole Boston Weatherford; illustrated by Kadir Nelson

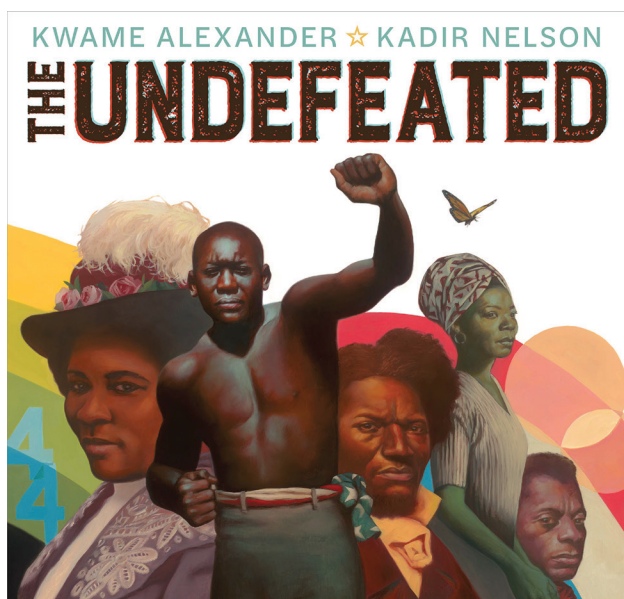
(2006) Jump at the Sun, an imprint of Hyperion Books for Children

# Ten Most Important Titles

## *Nelson Mandela*

Written and illustrated by Kadir Nelson

- (2013) Katherine Tegen Books, an imprint of HarperCollins
- (2013) HarperCollins, paperback, export edition
- (2013) HarperCollins, library edition
- (2013) Weston Woods, audiobook
- (2016) HarperCollins, e-book
- (2019) HarperCollins, paperback



## *The Undeclared*

Written by Kwame Alexander; illustrated by Kadir Nelson

- (2019) Versify, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
- (2019) Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, e-book
- (2020) Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, paperback

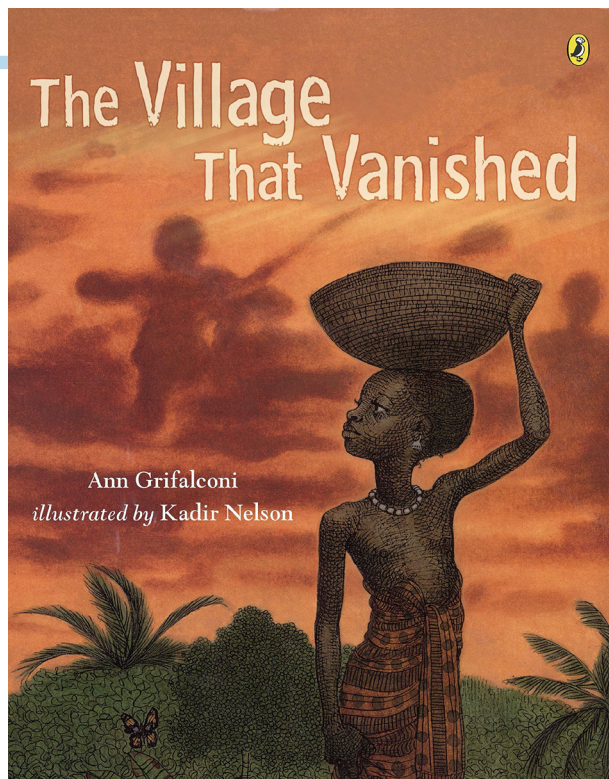
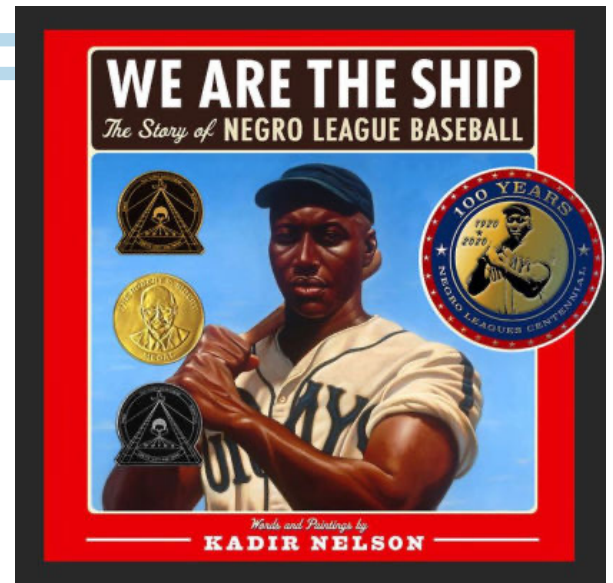


# Ten Most Important Titles

## *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*

Written and illustrated by Kadir Nelson

- (2008) Little, Brown Books for Young Readers
- (2009) Brilliance Audio, audiobook, CD format
- (2015) Brilliance Audio, audiobook, downloadable format



## *The Village That Vanished*

Written by Ann Grifalconi; illustrated by Kadir Nelson

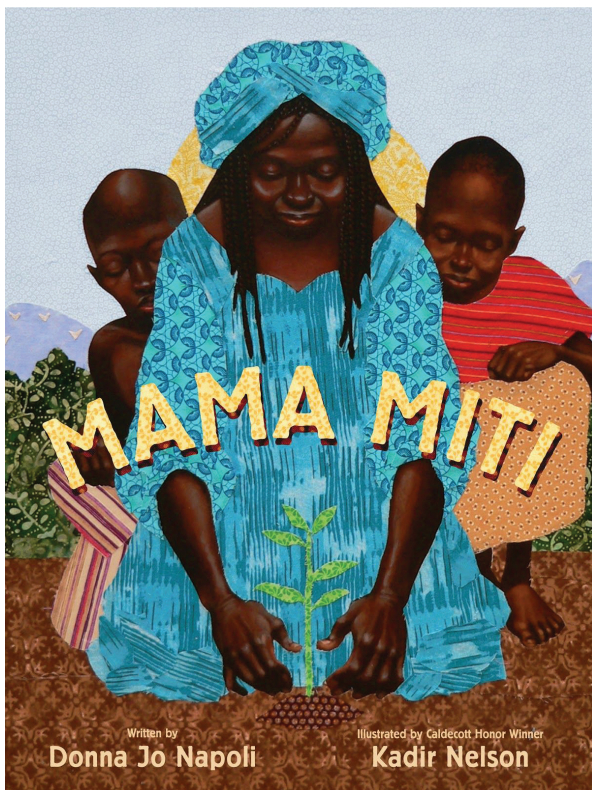
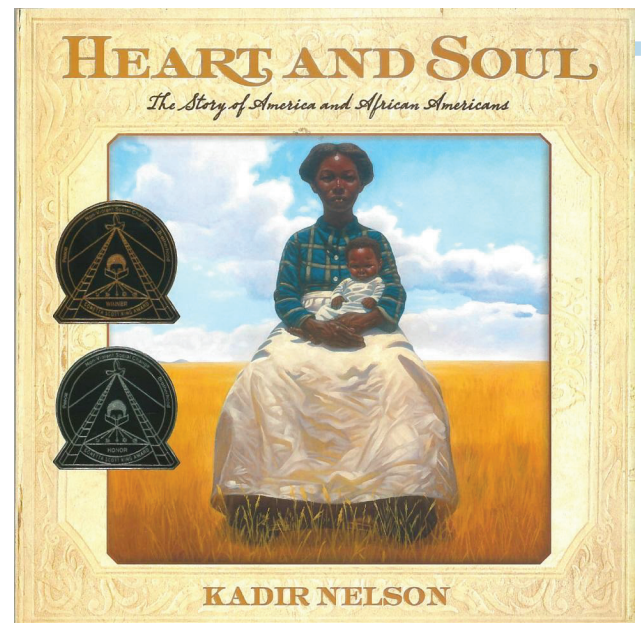
- (2002) Dial Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Penguin Books for Young Readers
- (2004) Puffin Books, an imprint of Penguin Books for Young Readers, paperback
- (2005) Turtleback, library edition

# Five Representative Titles

## *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans*

Written by Ellen Levine; illustrated by Kadir Nelson

(2011) Balzer + Bray, an imprint of HarperCollins



## *Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya*

Written by Donna Jo Napoli; illustrated by Kadir Nelson

(2010) Paula Wiseman Books, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing

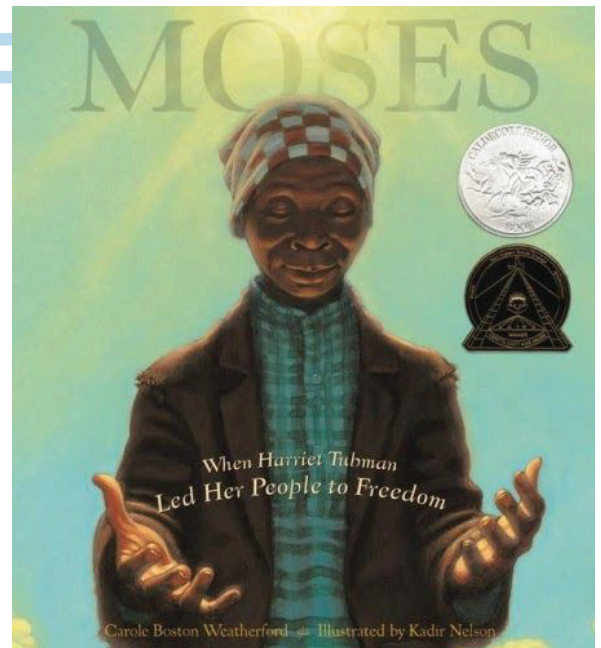


# Five Representative Titles

## *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*

Written by Carole Boston Weatherford;  
illustrated by Kadir Nelson

(2006) Jump at the Sun, an imprint of  
Hyperion Books for Children



## *Nelson Mandela*

Written and illustrated by Kadir Nelson

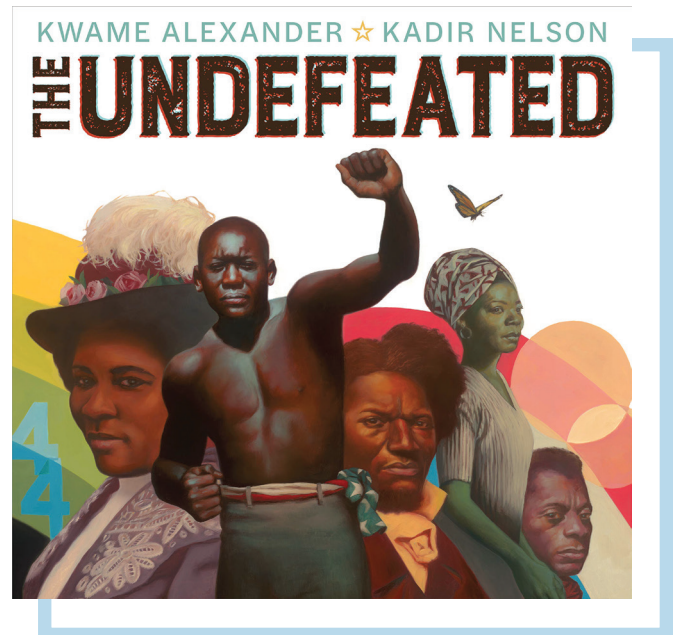
(2013) Katherine Tegen Books, an imprint of  
HarperCollins

# Five Representative Titles

## *The Undeclared*

Written by Kwame Alexander; illustrated by Kadir Nelson

(2019) Versify, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt



# Reviews of Submitted Titles

## *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans*

### *The Horn Book*

★ “Most folks my age and complexion don’t speak much about the past,” begins the unnamed narrator of this graceful and personalized overview of African American history. But this doesn’t stop her from telling the story in a sweeping account that succinctly covers history from the Colonial era to the present day. The aged woman tells of her own grandfather, who was captured in Africa at age six and illegally sold into slavery in 1850. From Pap’s story, we get a sense of what it was like to be a slave, a Union soldier, a sharecropper during Reconstruction, and a Buffalo soldier in Oklahoma; eventually he heads north to Chicago as part of the Great Migration. From there, the narrator takes over with her first-person account that includes the women’s suffrage movement, the Depression, World War II, and the civil rights movement, and ends with the pride she felt voting for President Obama. “As I cast my vote, I thought about my grandfather Pap, who didn’t live to see this moment, and my three children and two brothers, who did.” As in *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*, Nelson effectively creates a voice that is at once singular and representative. Each page of text is accompanied by a magnificent oil painting, most of which are moving portraits—some of famous figures such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington, and Joe Louis; others of unnamed African Americans, such as a Revolutionary War soldier, a child cleaning cotton, and a factory worker. The illustrations (forty-seven in all, including six dramatic double-page spreads), combined with the narrative, give us a sense of intimacy, as if we are hearing an elder tell stories as we look at an album of family photographs. A tour de force in the career of an author/artist who continues to outdo himself.





# Reviews of Submitted Titles

## *School Library Journal*

★ Expanding his focus from the close-up view of history applied in previous books, Nelson uses his formidable skills for the larger landscape: the black experience in America from slavery to the presidency. Like most surveys, the book is organized by struggles and wars; unlike traditional overviews, the facts are filtered through the eyes of a black woman with attitude to spare. This invented narrator, whose “Pap” was kidnapped as a child in Africa and whose brothers fought in World War II, does not suffer fools. Her colloquial commentary, addressed to “honey” or “chile,” introduces and interprets the events. Occasionally her voice drops out, and a more textbooklike tone prevails, but mostly her presence provides the heart and soul of the story; readers will care about this information because they care about her. Nelson’s oil portraits and tableaux consistently display technical virtuosity, drama, and dignity. From single-page compositions of historical personalities (Frederick Douglass, Joe Louis, Rosa Parks) and representative characters (a Revolutionary War soldier, students at Woolworth’s) to full-spread, murallike scenes of a slave ship, a battle, a big band, Nelson varies the viewpoint and contrasts light and darkness to tell a riveting tale. The purpose is presented in the prologue and recast in the epilogue and author’s note: “You have to know where you came from so you can move forward.” Provocative and powerful, this book offers a much-needed perspective for individuals of all ages seeking to understand America’s past and present.



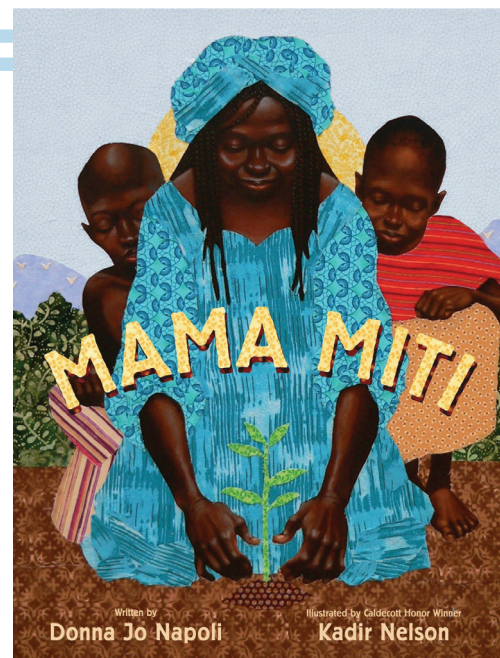
From *Heart and Soul: The Story of American and African Americans*, written and illustrated by Kadir Nelson

# Reviews of Submitted Titles

## *Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya*

### *Kirkus Reviews*

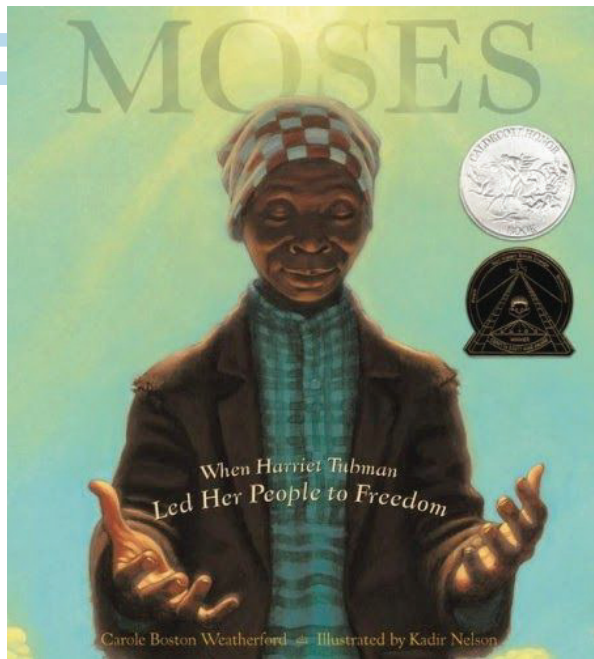
★ Napoli adopts a folkloric narrative technique to showcase the life work of Wangari Maathai, whose seminal role in Kenya’s reforestation earned her the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. When, one after the other, women journey to Maathai to seek counsel about scarce food, disappearing firewood and ailing animals, she tells them, “Plant a tree...Thayu nyumba—peace, my people.” Specific tree species and their utility are mentioned in the text and reiterated in a glossary. Nelson’s pictures, a jaw-dropping union of African textiles collaged with oil paintings, brilliantly capture the villagers’ clothing and the greening landscape. The richly modulated oils portray the dignified, intent gazes of Maathai and other Kenyans, and the illustrator’s signature use of perspective suggests the everyday heroism of his subjects. In addition to incorporating the fabric collages (and some whimsy in his animal depictions), the artist newly focuses on landscape, with many double-page spreads depicting undulating fields, distant mountains and a white-hot sky. Deserving of a special place with Claire Nivola’s *Planting the Trees of Kenya* (2008), this is, in a word, stunning.



### *Booklist*

Luminous illustrations are the highlight of this third recent picture-book biography of Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan environmental activist who received the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize. In brief, poetic lines that have a folktale tone, Napoli describes how “wise Wangari” helped Kenyan village women solve problems from hunger to dirty water with the same solution: “Plant a tree.” Eventually, Maathai’s Green Belt movement became a worldwide mission. Jeanette Winter’s *Wangari’s Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa* and Claire A. Nivola’s *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai* (both 2008) integrate more background context, and readers encountering Maathai’s story for the first time here will need to start with the appended short biography in order to understand the story’s generalized references. Most noteworthy is Nelson’s vibrant collage artwork, which features soaring portraits and lush landscapes in oil paint and printed fabrics. An author’s note about sources and a glossary of Kikuyu and Swahili words used throughout the text close this moving tribute, which will partner well with Winter’s and Nivola’s titles.

# Reviews of Submitted Titles



## *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*

### *Booklist*

Weatherford's handsome picture book focuses mostly on Tubman's religious inspiration, with echoes of spirituals ringing throughout the spare poetry about her struggle ("Lord, don't let nobody turn me 'round"). God cradles Tubman and talks with her; his words (printed in block capitals) both inspire her and tell her what to do ("SHED YOUR SHOES; WADE IN THE WATER TO TRICK THE DOGS"). Nelson's stirring, beautiful artwork makes clear the terror and exhaustion Tubman felt during her own escape and also during her brave rescue of others. There's no romanticism: the pictures are dark, dramatic, and deeply colored—whether showing the desperate young fugitive

"crouched for days in a potato hole" or the tough middle-aged leader frowning at the band of runaways she's trying to help. The full-page portrait of a contemplative Tubman turning to God to help her guide her people is especially striking.

### *Kirkus Reviews*

★ In elegant free verse, Weatherford imagines Tubman's remarkable escape from slavery and her role in guiding hundreds to freedom. Diverse typography braids three distinct narrative strands. White or black type delivers the third-person immediacy of Harriet's journey: "At nightfall, Harriet climbs into a wagon, / and the farmer covers her with blankets. / As the wagon wobbles along, Harriet worries that it is heading to jail." Larger, italic type telegraphs the devout Harriet's prayerful dialogue with God: "*Shall I leap, Lord?*" God's responses to her beseeching questions garner capitalized letters in warm grays. Nelson's double-page, full-bleed paintings illuminate both the dire physical and transcendent spiritual journey. At night, the moon lights Harriet's care-wracked face below a deep teal, star-pricked sky. By day, she disappears: A distant safe farm appears under a wan blue sky; a wagon transporting the hidden Harriet silhouettes against a golden sunset. Unique perspective and cropping reveal Tubman's heroism. Reaching Philadelphia, she's haloed in sunlight. Embracing her role as conductor, Harriet's face, eyes on the journey ahead, fairly bursts the picture plane against a blazing blue sky. Transcendent.

# Reviews of Submitted Titles

## *Nelson Mandela*

### *Kirkus Reviews*

★ Mandela's has been a monumental life, a fact made clear on the front cover, which features an imposing, full-page portrait. The title is on the rear cover. His family gave him the Xhosa name Rolihlahla, but his schoolteacher called him Nelson. Later, he was sent to study with village elders who told him stories about his beautiful and fertile land, which was conquered by European settlers with more powerful weapons. Then came apartheid, and his protests, rallies and legal work for the cause of racial equality led to nearly 30 years of imprisonment followed at last by freedom for Mandela and for all South Africans. "The ancestors, / The people, / The world, / Celebrated." Nelson's writing is spare, poetic, and grounded in empathy and admiration. His oil paintings on birch plywood are muscular and powerful. Dramatic moments are captured in shifting perspectives; a whites-only beach is seen through a wide-angle lens, while faces behind bars and faces beaming in final victory are masterfully portrayed in close-up. A beautifully designed book that will resonate with children and the adults who wisely share it with them. An inspirational ode to the life of the great South African leader by an award-winning author and illustrator.



### *Publishers Weekly*

★ Nelson's (*I Have a Dream*) large, luminous, and almost photographic paintings make this an extremely powerful picture-book biography of South Africa's first black president. The wordless cover alone is arresting, as an older Mandela gazes serenely at readers (the book's title and Nelson's author/illustrator credit appear on the back). From a silhouette of Mandela (born Rolihlahla, which means "troublemaker") as a boy play fighting with sticks on a country hillside to a portrait of him as a bearded young man staring out from behind prison bars, Nelson's pictures are an immediate focal point, but also help tell the story. The straightforward narrative is broken up like verse ("The state vowed to put Nelson in jail/ and he went underground./ He wore different disguises/ and lived in the shadows"), clearly explaining the concept of apartheid and the efforts of Mandela and others to fight it. Concluding author notes offer more details about Mandela's life. It's a solid biography in its own right, but thanks to Nelson's characteristically stunning paintings, it soars.

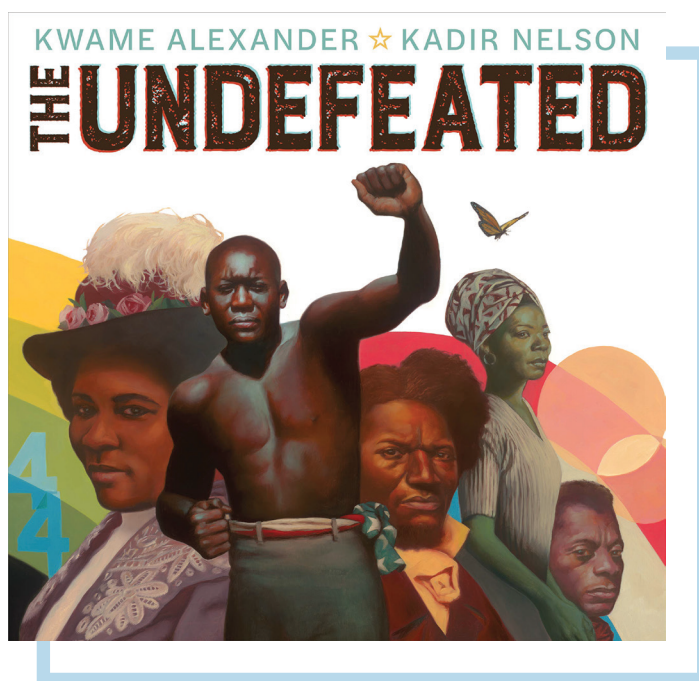


# Reviews of Submitted Titles

## *The Undefeated*

### *School Library Journal*

★ This inaugural title from Newbery Medalist Alexander's new imprint is a poignant and powerful ode to the resilience and strength of black life and history in America. Originally performed for ESPN's project "The Undefeated" in 2016, the poem adopts a picture-book format with a new title, accompanied by stunning oil paintings in Nelson's trademark photorealistic style. The evocative illustrations stand out against stark white backgrounds and vary in their composition. On some spreads, the focus is on a single expressive portrait; others feature collages of African American icons from various disciplines, or refer to significant historical moments. The art functions in perfect harmony with the poet's spare, striking verse to electrify the Black American experience, and to celebrate black athletes, writers, musicians, activists, and heroes. From the unspeakable trauma of American slavery and the transatlantic slave trade to the brave service of black troops during the Civil War, from the fierce and unwavering fight for civil rights to the Black Lives Matter movement, from Selma to Birmingham to Harlem, this book is both a soaring tribute to the enduring perseverance and achievements of the past and a stirring call to action to "the dreamers and the doers" of the present and the future. Back matter includes an afterword from the author as well as additional information about the historical figures and events featured in the book. Alexander and Nelson present an exceptionally moving and triumphant work. This book is an essential first purchase for all libraries.





# Reviews of Submitted Titles

## *Kirkus Reviews*

★ Past and present are quilted together in this innovative overview of black Americans' triumphs and challenges in the United States. Alexander's poetry possesses a straightforward, sophisticated, steady rhythm that, paired with Nelson's detail-oriented oil paintings, carries readers through generations chronicling "the unforgettable," "the undeniable," "the unflappable," and "the righteous marching ones," alongside "the unspeakable" events that shape the history of black Americans. Nelson layers images of black creators, martyrs, athletes, and neighbors onto blank white pages, patterns pages with the bodies of slaves stolen and traded, and extends a memorial to victims of police brutality like Sandra Bland and Michael Brown past the very edges of a double-page spread. Each movement of Alexander's poem is a tribute to the ingenuity and resilience of black people in the U.S., with textual references to the writings of Gwendolyn Brooks, Martin Luther King Jr., Langston Hughes, and Malcolm X dotting stanzas in explicit recognition and grateful admiration. The book ends with a glossary of the figures acknowledged in the book and an afterword by the author that imprints the refrain "Black. Lives. Matter" into the collective soul of readers, encouraging them, like the cranes present throughout the book, to "keep rising." An incredible connector text for young readers eager to graduate to weighty conversations about our yesterday, our now, and our tomorrow.

## Appendix: About Review Sources

Founded in 1905, *Booklist* magazine is the review journal of the American Library Association. It comprises two print magazines, an extensive website and database, e-newsletters, webinars, and other resources that support librarians in collection development and readers' advisory. *Booklist* sponsors the Printz Award, for the most distinguished books for young adults published each year in the U.S., and its editors serve as consultants to many ALA youth book award committees each year.

Bertha Mahony founded *The Horn Book* in 1924 to herald the best in children's literature. Today, *The Horn Book Magazine* and *The Horn Book Guide* are among the most distinguished journals in the field of children's and young adult literature.

Founded in 1933, *Kirkus* has been an authoritative voice in book discovery for 80 years. *Kirkus Reviews* magazine gives industry professionals a sneak peek at the most notable books being published weeks before they're released. *Kirkus* serves the book reviews to consumers in a weekly email newsletter and on *Kirkus.com*, giving readers unbiased, critical recommendations they can trust. The Kirkus Star is one of the most prestigious designations in the book industry.

*Publishers Weekly* is familiarly known in the book world as *PW* and "the bible of the book business." *PW* is a weekly news magazine focused on the international book publishing business. It is targeted at publishers, booksellers, librarians, literary agents, authors, and the media. It offers feature articles and news on all aspects of the book business, bestsellers lists in a number of categories, and industry statistics, but its best known service is pre-publication book reviews, publishing some 9,000 per year.

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