

About the Book

The story of America and African Americans is a story of hope, inspiration, and unwavering courage. This is the story of the men, women, and children who toiled in the hot sun, picking cotton for their masters; it's about the America ripped in two by Jim Crow laws; it's about the brothers and sisters of all colors who rallied against those who would dare bar a child from an education. It's a story of discrimination and broken promises, determination and triumphs.

Kadir Nelson has created an epic yet intimate introduction to the history of America and African Americans. Touching on some of the great transformative events and small victories of American history, this inspiring book demonstrates that in gaining their freedom and equal rights, African Americans helped our country achieve its promise of liberty and justice—the true heart and soul of our nation.



About Kadir Nelson

Kadir Nelson is the acclaimed illustrator of nearly thirty books for children. He has received Caldecott Honors for *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* (for which he also garnered a Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award), and *Henry's Freedom Box*. His authorial debut, *We Are the Ship*, was a *New York Times* bestseller and a Coretta Scott King Author Award and Illustrator Honor. His appeal and influence is widespread; he has been commissioned by the U.S. Congress to paint a portrait of Shirley Chisholm, which will be displayed among the portraits of other great lawmakers in our nation's capital. Kadir's artwork has been featured on commemorative stamps for the USPS. He is also the cover artist for Michael Jackson's posthumous album *Michael*. You can visit him online at www.kadirnelson.com.

David Harrison



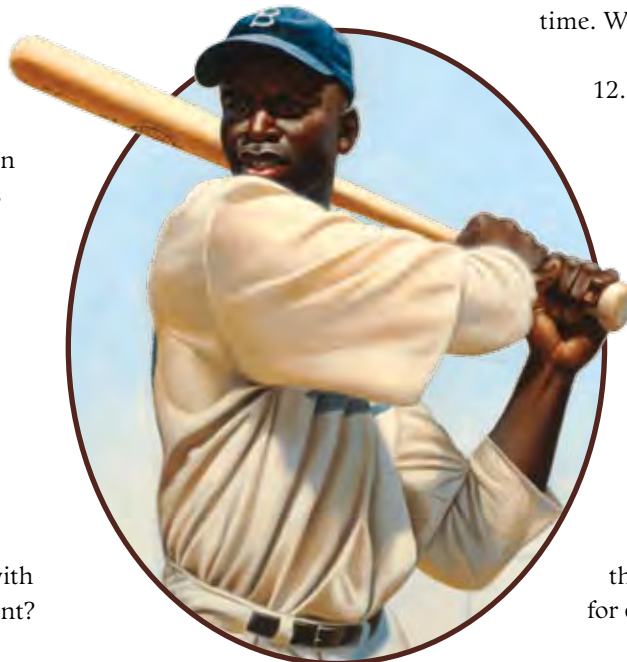
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Discussion Questions

1. Who is speaking in the prologue, and who is the “honey” whom she is addressing? Why did the author choose to tell this history through the voice of a narrator telling the story to someone she cares about?
2. Why is Chapter 1 titled “Declarations of Independence” in the plural? How did most African Americans come to this country, and why were they not encouraged in the beginning of the Revolution to fight in the Continental Army?
3. Discuss the statement: “It would be a long while before we figured out that we could not win our freedom with our fists or guns. We would have to find another way” [p. 21]. How did the institution of slavery force the people into submission?
4. Why didn’t the writers of the U.S. Constitution stop slavery in the beginning of this country? What points might have come up in a debate among the delegates to the Constitutional Convention? Discuss William Lloyd Garrison’s quote: “That which is not just is not law” [p. 23].
5. Discuss the events leading up to the Civil War. Why did slavery end in the North but continue in the South? Why did it take so long for black soldiers to be allowed to fight in the Union Army? Why do you think “Pap” returned to his old plantation after the war?
6. Discuss the Reconstruction Era after the Civil War and why it represented a virtual return to slavery conditions for most African Americans. What were the causes of the failure of Reconstruction? What were Jim Crow laws and how did they affect the social life of a community?
7. Discuss the connection between African Americans and Native Americans. What aspects of their lives did they have in common? What were the differences in their experiences with European settlers on this continent?
8. What effect did the Great Migration have on the lives of African Americans? Why did so many leave their homes? What were the challenges that faced them in their new communities?
9. Discuss the importance of the arts to African Americans in the early twentieth century. Why is this period different from the period before? How many ways did the African American experience begin to influence the arts in America?
10. Why was the boxing match between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling so important to people around the world? Discuss the quote from Jackie Robinson: “I learned that I was in two wars, one against the foreign enemy, the other against prejudice at home” [p.71]. How did the experience of fighting in World War II change the people who returned from the war? How did it change the country? What does the narrator mean when she says, “Jim Crow’s days were numbered” [p. 77]?
11. What does the narrator call “the most important idea ever introduced to America by a Negro” [p. 80]? Why is this idea more important than scientific discoveries? Discuss the impact of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s ideas on African Americans and on the history of his time. Why was he unique?
12. Why is the last chapter titled “Revolution”? Compare the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s to the American Revolution in 1776. How are these social upheavals similar? Why did it take nearly two-hundred years for the rights of African Americans to catch up to the rights of white Americans? Is the revolution over? Why does the narrator say that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the “beginning of a new struggle for every American” [p. 95].



Classroom Activities

- 1. The Voyage Was Rough.** Draw a map of the routes that were taken by slave ships from Africa to the Americas. Indicate on your map the different countries in Africa from which people were kidnapped and sold as slaves. Show on your map what was known as the “triangle trade” and how it worked during the days of transatlantic slave trade in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.
- 2. Let Freedom Ring.** Read more about one of the key figures in the fight to free the slaves—Lincoln, Douglass, Tubman, etc. Write a character sketch of that person and include their childhood experiences as well as their adult life. What did you learn about this person that gave him or her the courage to fight for freedom?
- 3. Forty Acres and a Mule.** List the causes of the failure of Reconstruction after the Civil War. Describe the practice of “sharecropping” and how it worked. List the reasons why it was so difficult for African Americans to become fully independent under this kind of work.
- 4. A New Kind of Life.** Write a letter from an African American boy or girl who took part in the Great Migration to a friend or relative who stayed behind in the South. What changes would that child notice—the sights, the community, the way of life, the effect on the family? Include the experience of the journey and how it felt after the family was settled. Write a return letter from the friend or family member in the South describing life and experiences there.
- 5. A Renaissance of the Arts.** Read a story or a collection of poems by one of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance—Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, or another. Write about the emotions expressed in this piece and how it makes you feel as you read it today. What can you learn about the writer’s life experience that was expressed in his or her work?
- 6. The Sporting Life.** Research the life story of an historic African American sports star of the early twentieth century—Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, Wilma Rudolph, or another. Write a short biography about the athlete’s life experiences, the prejudice he or she faced, and the way he or she overcame obstacles in a quest for excellence. Present your subject to the class by telling his or her story in your own words.
- 7. Necessity Is the Mother of Invention.** Make a chart of the inventions and discoveries made by African Americans. Many of them are listed on pages 79 - 80, but you can find others by researching. Choose one of these inventions or discoveries and learn more about the inventor and the process he or she followed. What was the impact of this invention on other people? Why is it important to know about these inventors?



An Interview with Kadir Nelson

1. How did you decide on the voice for the narrator?

When conceiving the voice of the narrator, I thought of many of the people in my life whose soothing voices and wonderful stories I loved to hear again and again. People like my grandmother, my mother, my aunts and uncles, and friends like Walt McCoy, Debbie Allen, and Jerdine Nolen. I interviewed them and then rolled all their voices into one voice, that of an elder, a one-hundred-year-old African American woman whose family history would be closely tied to the history of America.

I wanted to hear the story of America as if it were just that, a story, so the narrator speaks to readers as if she were their grandmother. It makes this incredibly expansive history very intimate.

2. What part of the history did you find most difficult to write about and to illustrate?

I found World War I to be a bit tricky to write about because it was a very highly politicized and convoluted affair that most people really didn't and still don't understand. Writing about it in a way that was honest and true to the character telling the story and also engaging to young readers was no simple task. It's almost like trying to explain America's role in Vietnam or Iraq in a simple way. There are a lot of moving parts.

The biggest challenge I faced when creating the art was the sheer number of paintings I had to create to tell the story—almost fifty paintings! I still marvel at that number.

3. What part of the history did you most enjoy writing about and illustrating?

I enjoyed writing about Pap and his journey most of all. His life was probably the most varied and transformative of all in the narrator's family. He was born in Africa and captured at a very young age and then brought to America and made a slave. He escaped as a young man and then fought with the Union in the Civil War. After the war, Pap became a Buffalo Soldier out west where he met his wife, Sarah, a member of the Seminole nation. He returned to the South and became a sharecropper and then moved North with his family during what would

later be called the Great Migration, working alongside the masses of African Americans who contributed to the war efforts. Pap's journey truly is the story of early African Americans in the United States.

Out of all the paintings in the book, I most enjoyed painting Pap's portrait as a young child.

4. How did you choose specific incidents to write about and illustrate? How much did you rely on family stories and how much on research to depict different eras?

When composing this story, I knew I had to write about major milestones in the American story: the American Revolution, slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, etc., as well as intimate family stories from the narrator's family history. I would address how these incidences, large and small, affected the narrator's family and the rest of the country.

Many of the narrator's family stories came from my interviewing elder family members on both sides of my family and historical interviews conducted by others. Pap's name came from my aunt's aunt, Gaynell Taylor. The story about black-eyed peas comes from my great-great-grandfather who forbade his descendants from eating them on New Year's Day. Or former slaves' eyewitness accounts of Civil War battles—stories like these made this history much more real to me.

5. What changes do you think need to occur in America in the next one hundred years? What new chapters would you want a future historian to be able to add to this story?

If I had any say about how things should go, I'd hope that racism, nationalism, and classism were a thing of the past. It's a tall order, but it's not impossible. With each new generation, racism loses its footing, and as the world grows smaller with the World Wide Web and easier travel, other barriers may fall.

