Kadir Nelson
Illustrator

You never need to see a children’s book illustrated by San Diego-born Kadir Nelson to be familiar with his work. Many of us have seen his dynamic images of basketball players, Negro League baseball figures and scenes that celebrate African-American history and culture in paintings and posters for sale all around the country. But what you may not know is that he was the conceptual artist behind the Oscar-nominated animated film Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron and the man whose vision of the Middle Passage brought Amistad to life for director Steven Spielberg.

His success as an artist is no surprise. Citing his artistic ability at the age of three, Nelson acknowledges, “I have always been an artist... It’s part of my DNA.” Supported by his family, he was apprenticed at 11 to his uncle, artist and arts instructor Michael Morris. It was then that he developed his foundation in art, a base that won him an architecture scholarship to the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. “Some people said that I should become an architect,” he said. “Use my drawing ability for that.” But his heart wasn’t in it. After changing his major to illustration, he never looked back.

Nelson is dedicated to creating artwork that, “gives people a sense of hope and nobility... I want to show the strength and integrity of the human being and the human spirit.” In line with that mission, illustrating positive, inspiring children’s books is an important part of his artistic career. Believing that children’s books are a young person’s introduction to the arts, Kadir has collaborated with notable authors and entertainers to bring incredible stories to life. He won the 2005 Coretta Scott King Award for his work in Jerdine Nolen’s Thunder Rose, a wonderful story about a young black cowgirl. He has worked with Debbie Allen on Dancing in the Wings, and he illustrated the bestseller Please, Baby, Please, written by Spike and Tonya Lee. Nelson was also awarded an NAACP Image Award for his images in Just the Two of Us, written by Will Smith.

In addition to his commercial success, Nelson has also exhibited internationally at many museums and galleries. His work has been shown at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles, The Studio Museum in Harlem, the Bristol Museum in England and The Citizens Gallery of Yokohama, Japan, among other venues. His work is in the private collections of Denzel Washington, Debbie Allen, and Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith.

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