



We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball

By Kadir Nelson

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"We are the ship; all else the sea."-Rube Foster, founder of the Negro National League

The story of Negro League baseball is the story of gifted athletes and determined owners; of racial discrimination and international sportsmanship; of fortunes won and lost; of triumphs and defeats on and off the field. It is a perfect mirror for the social and political history of black America in the first half of the twentieth century. But most of all, the story of the Negro Leagues is about hundreds of unsung heroes who overcame segregation, hatred, terrible conditions, and low pay to do the one thing they loved more than anything else in the world: play ball.

Using an "Everyman" player as his narrator, Kadir Nelson tells the story of Negro League baseball from its beginnings in the 1920s through its decline after Jackie Robinson crossed over to the majors in 1947. The voice is so authentic, you will feel as if you are sitting on dusty bleachers listening intently to the memories of a man who has known the great ballplayers of that time and shared their experiences. But what makes this book so outstanding are the dozens of full-page and double-page oil paintings-breathtaking in their perspectives, rich in emotion, and created with understanding and affection for these lost heroes of our national game.

We Are the Ship is a tour de force for baseball lovers of all ages.

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We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball By Kadir Nelson Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Starred Review. Grade 3 Up—A lost piece of American history comes to life in Kadir Nelson's elegant and eloquent history (Hyperion/Jump at the Sun, 2008) of the Negro Leagues and its gifted baseball players. The history of the Leagues echoes the social and political struggles of black America during the first half of the 20th century. There were scores of ballplayers who never became as famous as Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb and were almost lost in obscurity because of segregation—and Nelson recreates their history here. The narrative is divided into nine innings, beginning with Rube Foster and his formation of the first Negro League in 1920 and closing with Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier into white major league baseball. In between are fascinating snippets of the events and men who formed the Negro Leagues. Listeners glimpse the pain black Americans endured because of bigotry and segregation, but the true center of this story is the joy of baseball and the joy men felt at being able to play the game. Hall of Famer Hank Aaron, who began playing with the Negro Leagues, provides the foreword. Eloquent narration is performed by actor Dion Graham, and a bluesy guitar introduction and conclusion is reminiscent of the time period. Nelson's stunning oil paintings are included on a CD—but make sure to have the book available as well. Social studies teachers and baseball fans of all ages will covet this delightful winner of the 2009 Coretta Scott King author award and illustrator Honor award.—*Tricia Melgaard, Centennial Middle School, Broken Arrow, OK*

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Award-winning illustrator and first-time author Nelson's history of the Negro Leagues, told from the vantage point of an unnamed narrator, reads like an old-timer regaling his grandchildren with tales of baseball greats Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and others who forged the path toward breaking the race barrier before Jackie Robinson made his historic debut. The narrative showcases the pride and comradery of the Negro Leagues, celebrates triumphing on one's own terms and embracing adversity, even as it clearly shows the "us" and "them" mentality bred by segregation. If the story is the pitch, though, it's the artwork that blasts the book into the stands. Nelson often works from a straight-on vantage point, as if the players took time out of the action to peer at the viewer from history, eyes leveled and challenging, before turning back to the field of play. With enormous blue skies and jam-packed grandstands backing them, these players look like the giants they are. The stories and artwork are a tribute to the spirit of the Negro Leaguers, who were much more than also-rans and deserve a more prominent place on baseball's history shelves. For students and fans (and those even older than the suggested grade level), this is the book to accomplish just that. Grades 5-8. --Ian Chipman

Review

Through text and artwork that pulses with life, Nelson has created a book that brings personality to the Negro Baseball League. Using the voice of "Everyman" in the league, this book will attract readers because of the full and double-page vibrant, realistic oil paintings, and immerse the reader in the compelling story being told. The author brings out interesting details about the league such as bus trips where players would relieve a sleepy driver and players would entertain their teammates. The reader meets famous players, like Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson, and the equally talented lesser known players. One enters the world of joy in the game of baseball and the hurt of segregation through the stories that take place away from the ballpark as well as on the field. One need not be a baseball fan to enjoy this book, because it's more than a sports story. It's a story of real people enduring more than many of us can imagine, playing a game they love. The book's title comes from "We are the ship; all else the sea" a quote from Rube Foster, the founder of the Negro

National League. Library Media Connection"

Award-winning illustrator and first-time author Nelson's history of the Negro Leagues, told from the vantage point of an unnamed narrator, reads like an old-timer regaling his grandchildren with tales of baseball greats Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and others who forged the path toward breaking the race barrier before Jackie Robinson made his historic debut. The narrative showcases the pride and camaraderie of the Negro Leagues, celebrates triumphing on one's own terms and embracing adversity, even as it clearly delineates the "us" and "them" mentality bred by segregation. If the story is the pitch, though, it's the artwork that blasts the book into the stands. Nelson often works from a straight-on vantage point, as if the players took time out of the action to peer at the viewer from history, eyes leveled and challenging, before turning back to the field of play. With enormous blue skies and jam-packed grandstands backing them, these players look like the giants they are. The stories and artwork contained here are a tribute to the spirit of the Negro Leaguers who created much more than an also-ran and deserve a more prominent place on baseball's history shelves. For students and fans (and those even older than the suggested grade level), this is the book to accomplish just that.

Booklist"

Nelson continues to top himself with each new book. Here, working solo for the first time, he pays tribute to the hardy African-American players of baseball's first century with a reminiscence written in a collective voice—"But you know something? We had many Josh Gibsons in the Negro Leagues. We had many Satchel Paiges. But you never heard about them"—matched to a generous set of full-page painted portraits and stadium views. Generally viewed from low angles, the players seem to tower monumentally, all dark-skinned game faces glowering up from the page and big, gracefully expressive hands dangling from powerful arms. Arranging his narrative into historical "Innings," the author closes with lists of Negro Leaguers who played in the Majors, and who are in the Baseball Hall of Fame, plus a detailed working note. 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. Kirkus"

Imagine listening to baseball legends Willie Mays and Ernie Banks swapping stories about their Negro League days as they sit in the stands, munching on peanuts and watching Ken Griffey Jr. launch a curve ball into the stratosphere. That kind of easygoing, conversational storytelling is exactly what Kadir Nelson achieves in this pitch-perfect history of Negro League baseball. "Seems like we've been playing baseball for a mighty long time. At least as long as we've been free," the narrator says. Nelson's collective "we" honors "the voice of every player," as he explains in an author's note, and it also works to draw readers into and through the text's nine "innings." Nelson's extensive research (including interviews with former players) yields loads of attention-grabbing details: how much money players made; where, when, and how often games took place; who the standout owners, managers, and players were; and so on. And not surprisingly, he often returns to the impact of racism on the leagues, teams, and individual athletes. His grand slam, though, is the art: Nelson's oil paintings have a steely dignity, and his from-the-ground perspectives make the players look larger than life. The book also includes a foreword by Hank Aaron, an Extra Innings section identifying Hall-of-Fame Negro Leaguers, a bibliography, endnotes, and an index. Horn Book"

In this attractive, oversized book, Nelson offers an appreciative tribute to the Negro Leagues. Adopting the perspective and voice of an elderly ballplayer, he offers a readable account that is infused with an air of nostalgic oral history: "Seems like we've been playing baseball for a mighty long time. At least as long as we've been free." With African Americans banned from playing in the major leagues, Rube Foster organized the Negro Leagues in 1920 and grandly proclaimed: "We are the ship; all else the sea." From 1920 through the 1940s, they offered African Americans an opportunity to play ball and earn a decent living when opportunities to do so were scarce. Nine chapters offer an overview of the founding and history of the

leagues, the players, style of play, and the league's eventual demise after Jackie Robinson broke major league baseball's color barrier in 1947. Nelson's brilliant, almost iconic paintings vividly complement his account. Starting with the impressive cover painting of a proud, determined Josh Gibson, the artist brings to light the character and inherent dignity of his subjects. Hank Aaron, who started his Hall of Fame career in the Negro Leagues, contributes a heartfelt foreword. This work expands on the excellent overview offered in Carole Boston Weatherford's *A Negro League Scrapbook* (Boyd's Mills, 2005). It is an engaging tribute that should resonate with a wide audience and delight baseball fans of all ages. SLJ"

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Angie Dean:

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