

Ellington Was Not a Street

By Ntozke Shange
Simon and Schuster, 2004



**Reviewed by
Bettie Boswell**

One word of advice concerning *Ellington Was Not a Street*: don't read this book to your students at least not until they understand the soul of this pictured

poem. Instead, help your students picture Harlem sometime in the mid-twentieth century. Imagine being there with the most famous people in the world. That's what it was like for author Ntozke Shange when she was a little girl, perhaps the very one pictured in a stunning blue dress, holding a LP album, on the book's appealing cover. Famous men who changed the world walked through her surgeon father's door on a regular basis. Her parents' support of the arts and the African American community in general often brought greats like Dubois and Dizzy Gillespie into their home. As you introduce your students to these political and musical legends, look to the back reference pages for information on each personality. Help your students understand the culture of the times. Tangy collard greens flavored with bacon were favored over milder greens. Getting together with others was more of an option than watching television. Politics would have been a hot topic in the days before Civil Rights demonstrations. Music greats of that day found their way to fame through vinyl records instead of CDs.

As the book is opened to the title page, once again you view the young girl with her record, but this time she is older. In 1983, Ms. Shange as an adult wrote the poetry used in this book and titled it *Mood Indigo*. This same title is one of Duke Ellington's famous jazz pieces and is the record pictured in *Ellington Was Not a Street*. Ms. Shange is also a dancer who has been inspired

to create movement to her poems. As the poem is read, perhaps it will inspire your students to create sound pieces or movement to reflect some of the words of the book: "a street (crowded with people and cars,) memory, up my father's stairs, hummed a tune, (drumming for Ray Baretto,) company of men, dreams, all kinds of folks, safe and loved, fighter." You might want to explore Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo" as a listening/movement activity.

Students will fall in love with the wonderfully detailed drawings by Kadir Nelson. Norman Rockwell could not have done a better job of creating character and warmth through each rendering of the young girl and the faces surrounding her. My students overwhelmingly thought the artwork was the most appealing part of the book. They especially appreciated the scene where "daddy's arms held us safe and loved" and the painting of a great family-reunion-style portrait. One student remarked that it doesn't matter if you are from different families, if you all get along, then you are a family. We learned that the fine dressed gentleman on the back cover was indeed the Duke himself. Ellington became known as the Duke

because he was always well dressed. Mr. Nelson's illustrations are an astounding dress for a poem that needs a lot of understanding.

Understanding this book was at first difficult. A first read through was frustrating as students and adults both said, "I just don't get it." However, knowing backgrounds of the author, artist, and great African Americans of the mid-twentieth century opened doors to understanding the poetic words and detailed paintings in this story. So, never judge a book by its cover or by its first read through: you might miss a real gem.

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