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Tucson author Adiba Nelson is Pima County Library's first Black writer in residence

Adiba Nelson has written two books: a memoir about motherhood and a children's book.

Bill Finley Special to the Arizona Daily Star
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Next week, Adiba Nelson will begin a two-month term as the Writer in Residence at Pima County Public Library, the first Black author ever selected.

Bill Finley

If you have met Adiba Nelson you know she can be painfully, often hilariously, self-aware.

“I’m a fat Black woman with a gap in her teeth and nappy hair,” she said. “I ain’t no cover girl.”

Yet there she is, on the cover of a book, wearing a green dress and trying hard not to look down at the author’s name: Adiba Nelson.

Her book, “Ain’t That a Mother,” was re-released as a paperback this summer. It might be the most refreshingly frank memoir ever written, told with heart, humor and honesty ... and in the same voice as the woman who lived it.

She definitely puts herself out there. Among other things, she reviews two failed marriages, a surprise pregnancy, post-partum depression, her short career with a local burlesque troupe, and learning her daughter had cerebral palsy.

The heading for Chapter 11: “Sh** Nobody Talks About.”

More than anything, Nelson’s memoir is real, and real people have noticed.

She was a presenting author at the Tucson Festival of Books in March.

Next week, she will begin a two-month term as the Writer in Residence at Pima County Public Library, the first Black author ever selected.

“Ain’t That a Mother” will become a TV series after the screenwriter and screen actors strike is over.

“I was so happy I bought a pink velvet couch to celebrate,” Nelson said.

Many Tucsonans knew Nelson as an inspirational speaker before reading her memoir. She did a TEDx talk called “Skating Downhill” in 2017. A documentary about her, entitled “Full Nelson,” won an Emmy for Arizona Illustrated in 2018. Before the pandemic, she spoke at a number of local events, often about inclusion.

But the springboard had been the children’s book Nelson wrote for her daughter, Emory. It was entitled “Meet ClaraBelle Blue,” and featured a young Black girl making the most of life from her wheelchair.

“When I started reading books to Emory, I wanted to find books about kids like her,” Nelson explained. “We went to Barnes & Noble one day and asked if they had some books about disabled children. This was 2011, and they said no. Well, how ‘bout Black girls? Again, no.

“Well, I got angry. I went home and wrote my daughter a story in about 10 minutes. It was just a rinky-dink story about a little Black girl in a pink dress and a wheelchair, but to her it was a book.”



It was a cousin who encouraged Nelson to make it a real, honest-to-goodness book. She did, but publishers said it was too niche.

“They said the world wasn’t ready, but I thought, ‘You know what? We’re here now. We don’t have time to wait for the world to be ready for my kid.’”

In 2013, Nelson self-published “Meet ClaraBelle Blue.” The book no publisher wanted is now available in the U.S., Europe, South America and Australia, both in English and Spanish.

Nelson’s luck was no better the next time she approached the major publishers, but several said they would be interested in a memoir.

“My agent, Jess Regel, asked if this was something I’d be interested in doing. I was like, well, the universe is saying I have to.”

The universe appears to have been right.

“What was wild was that we got a TV deal before we got a book deal,” Nelson said. “My agent has bigger dreams for me than I do, and she pitched the proposed plotline for my book to some TV producers, too. I had an adaptation contract for the book before I actually wrote the book.”

Born in New York City, Nelson moved to Tucson at age 11. The transition did not go smoothly — “I spent middle school grounded,” she recalls — but it did make her a bookworm.

“My mom’s punishment when I got in trouble was to take away everything I loved to do. She did let me read books, though. I got in a lot of trouble. I read a lot of books.”

While at Doolen Middle School, Nelson discovered a love of writing, too. She was the gossip columnist for the school newspaper.

There was a brief flirtation with a possible writing career while at Mesa Community College in Phoenix, but she didn't really get serious until the birth of her daughter.

"Writing kind of got me through my postpartum time," she said. "I started a blog for moms called 'Spit-Up is Sexy.' I was trying to cope with my problems with humor. I didn't know it, but one of my followers was Denene Millner, the author. She reached out to me one day and I about lost my mind. That gave me the chutzpah to think maybe my writing's not so bad."

No, it's not.

Nelson is now a professional author, with two novels under way and contracts to produce two children's books for Macmillan in 2024 and 2026.

For the time being, though, she is enjoying life as the author of "Ain't That a Mother."

"It's not a bestseller, but it has found its way to a lot of people who need it," Nelson said. "I've gotten messages from people who say I've told their story, that now they feel seen. There's this beautiful thing — when you allow yourself to be vulnerable, you tap into other people's humanity. People who need you find you. People who need this book now have it."

The library's Writer in Residence program enlists local authors to help new writers complete and publish their work. Nelson will be available for individual sessions through Nov. 18. Open-to-all workshops will begin Sept. 29 at Woods Memorial Library, 3455 N. First Ave. To schedule a visit with Nelson or learn more about her workshops, [click here](#).