

AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR NELDA LATEEF

Folktales Revisited

LESSONS FROM THE ELDERS | BY JANET SCHARP



Nelda LaTeef

Great Falls author/illustrator Nelda LaTeef recently celebrated the publication of her second children's picture book, *Animal Village* (Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2018), which was awarded the Kirkus Star, one of the most prestigious designations in the book industry, signifying a book of exceptional merit. As with her first, *The Hunter and the Ebony Tree*, (Moon Mountain Publishing, 2002), this new release is based on a folktale she heard from a griot, a storyteller, in the Republic of Niger. *Animal Village* is designed to immediately capture a child's attention with its bright orange book cover featuring silhouettes of jungle animals, with a tortoise atop an elephant leading the way.



All illustrations are by Nelda LaTeef. They are from the book *Animal Village* and are created using acrylic paint, Indian ink, textured papers, and collage on art board.

The story is set in a village in the African bush, inhabited only by animals. When a drought threatens the lives of the inhabitants, a tortoise named Timba recalls an "old story" from the elders: "If the sky will not give us water, we must dig and find water within the earth." Having no alternate plan, the animals work together. But when no water is found, they give up, blame the tortoise and drive her out of the village.

Wandering the savanna, Timba discovers plant growth at a dry riverbed. Digging, she reaches water and returns to taunt the animals with a gourd full of water. Seeing their distress, she decides instead to lead them to the lifesaving well she has dug. In gratitude, they make her the new village chief.

The story emphasizes the importance of listening to the wisdom of the elders, persevering and working together. Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole, Director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, commended the book in a cover blurb for the "mighty lessons" Nelda imparts to readers young and old.

Animal Village reflects Nelda's cultural and educational background, as well as her experience as a prize-winning author. Born to parents in the U.S. Foreign Service, Nelda became aware of different world cultures at an early age. Growing up, she lived in Tunisia, Afghanistan, Niger, Nigeria, Italy, Lebanon and Senegal. She returned to the United States to enter

Harvard, where she earned a bachelor's degree in social anthropology.

Nelda's first book, *Working Women for the 21st Century: 50 Women Reveal Their Pathways to Success* (Williamson Publishing, 1992), took shape following a discussion with her younger brother and sister regarding how people choose their careers. Nelda subsequently contacted and interviewed 50 successful women, including Elizabeth Dole, Maria Shriver, Sandra Day O'Connor and Chris Evert, to have them share their wisdom and career advice. Her second book, *Women of Lebanon: Interviews with Champions for Peace* (McFarland and Company, 1997), focused on how that country's long civil war affected the