



Nikki Grimes

**TeachingBooks.net Original In-depth
Author Interview**

Nikki Grimes interviewed in Corona, California on April 23, 2009.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You won the 2003 Coretta Scott King Author Book Award and the 2006 NCTE Award for Excellence in Children's Poetry, among many other honors for your writing. Yet on your Web site there are images of a variety of fine arts that you've produced, too. Please share more about your artist side.

NIKKI GRIMES: I discovered long ago that it's not a question of either-or for me. The arts fulfill something for me that the writing doesn't. I don't know why, I just know that that's true. And so over the years, I've always done fine crafts or explored some area of art.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you write and create art when you were younger?

NIKKI GRIMES: When I was younger, my interests were pretty much just with writing. I came to art later in life. In my teens I started sewing and designing clothes, and from there I moved on to crocheting and later, knitting. However, I never actually thought about visual art per se, because I was like most people who thought I couldn't draw a straight line with a ruler.

Then, a few years ago, I was fortunate enough to find an art teacher who was able to dislodge that notion. He taught us that everybody has the capacity to do art just as everyone has a capacity to learn basic writing. While everyone learns basic writing skills, that doesn't mean they're going to all be Shakespeare, and the same is true of visual art.

So once I got that notion solidly in my head, it freed me up to try things. I discovered I actually could draw a straight line *without* a ruler and a lot else besides. So, it's been fun.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What role did books play for you as a child?

NIKKI GRIMES: Books were part of my survival tools when I was growing up. I didn't have books of my own, because I was moved around from house to house and spent lots of time in and out of foster homes. So, I didn't own the books, but I spent lots of time in school and public libraries reading everything that wasn't nailed down.

My other survival tool was writing. I've been writing since I was six; I would sort of disappear into my writing when I needed a safe place. I would be with my books and my writing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What kinds of things did you write back then?

NIKKI GRIMES: I wrote poetry, predominantly. I was fascinated with words, with language, and with the idea that one word can mean many different things. So, I would do all kinds of jumbles and puzzles and word games, and I'd make up my own. I loved the challenge of telling a story or creating a visual image using as few words as possible. I lived in the world of poetry.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What draws you to poetry—both then and now?

NIKKI GRIMES: I love the music of poetry. I love the emotional impact of poetry. Poetry has the ability to bypass the defenses of the intellect and just make a beeline for the heart, and I've always loved that about poetry more than anything. I return to that genre again and again in my writing. For me, the most important aspect of my work is to make an emotional connection with the reader. And no genre does that more powerfully than poetry.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What does your writing begin with? A scene? A character? Is it possible to tell how you begin?

NIKKI GRIMES: By and large, I am a character-driven writer. I don't always know the story I'm going to tell, but I'll have a character begin to whisper to me what he or she wants me to tell about them—what story they want told.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please share an example of character-driven writing.

NIKKI GRIMES: Jazmin in *Jazmin's Notebook* told me things about her that I didn't know going in. The trick is to learn to trust the writing process; trust your individual process enough to keep writing even when you don't know where the story is going. I remember I got really terrified when I was working on *Jazmin's Notebook*. I had a great editor who would call me periodically to kind of talk me off the ledge and to tell me to just keep writing. I'd be panicky because I didn't know where the story was going, and she'd say it was okay, that I'd figure it out, and to just keep writing.

I did keep going, and about two-thirds of the way through, I had that "aha" moment when I suddenly knew where the book was going, and what the story was about, and it all sort of fell into place for me. It's a strange kind of process, but I have learned to trust it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Multiculturalism is a prominent theme in your books.

NIKKI GRIMES: Multiculturalism is just a natural part of my work; it comes out of my own life experience. When I was living in New York, I used to love to host an annual international food fest where I would invite friends of many different cultural backgrounds.

Of course, it was a lot of great food, but it was more than that. It was an opportunity to bring together people who would not necessarily ever be in the same room. By the end of the evening, I'd love how one after another friend would come over to me and say, "You know, so-and-so's not so bad," or "Such and such a group was not what I thought."

We live in a multicultural society, so I think that as long as an author writes respectfully from an authentic place, they can write about people from other cultures and do it legitimately. I believe that the job of the artist more than anything is to show the ways in which we are all alike beneath the skin, and what safer place to do that than in the pages of a book?

TEACHINGBOOKS: You're writing books for children that include different cultures, peoples, and experiences. What is your objective in doing so?

NIKKI GRIMES: Childhood is the time when we can introduce the variety of cultures around us and plant the seeds of global thinking. We can cultivate an understanding that there are other peoples in the world, and that we have more in common than we imagine. Children's literature makes it possible to break through some of the stereotypes that we grow up with and find all around us. In particular, there are the biases our individual families raise us with that we sort of inherit. Children's literature is a place where we can break down those barriers.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In a few of your books, there is some real grief. There is some real pain. And, there is so much beauty in your characters' experiences.

NIKKI GRIMES: I choose themes primarily because I see a need for books dealing with those issues. It troubled me for a long time that I wasn't seeing books that dealt with grief head-on for children aged 10 and up. There was nothing for a child who lost a sibling or a parent. There were books about losing your pet, but nothing more hardboiled than that.

I'm very service-oriented in my approach to writing. I'm looking for where the need is and then trying to fill that in my own way. I've done it with grief, with blended families, and with foster care systems.

Some of the experiences are those I've had personally. Others grow out of things I have witnessed or observed. But, I connect with each story emotionally on some level, whether or not it is my experience. I certainly have had losses, although I was not as young as the children in the book *What is Goodbye*. So, I start there, and then I move into research mode, so that I'm not only bringing my experience to the page, but also looking at the subject in a broader way.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *What is Goodbye* is a gentle story about grief.

NIKKI GRIMES: Well, it needs to be. When you've lost a loved one, particularly as a child, that is the most vulnerable you can be. By and large, adults assume if little Johnny isn't acting out, then little Johnny is fine. But Johnny can, in fact, be dying inside, and nobody knows it.

I know that most children do not have the benefit of grief counseling, or adults who enter into the grief with them, or even adults that are aware, often, that the child is grieving. So I wanted to create a tool that would help a child walk through this experience, if they had to on their own. I wanted *What is Goodbye* to assure them that what they're feeling is normal—that it's okay to cry and that there is an end to the heaviness of the grief.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It seems that there is a sort of wonderful breath at the end of most of your books.

NIKKI GRIMES: Well, you have to have that kind of ending. For me, children's literature is all about hope. If you're not going to incorporate that element, then you've missed the boat somehow. I believe that books can and should be healing.

That was an important aspect of literature for me as a child. And it's always been something that I've wanted to incorporate in writing my books. I write books that tap into a story's hope and have an element of inspiration because life can be hard.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Road to Paris* is about being in foster care. Can you share a little bit about this beautiful book?

NIKKI GRIMES: *Road to Paris* is very, very close to me. It's a much kinder, gentler version of my own experience in the foster care system. That was a huge, huge part of my life, and so it stays with me. Once again, as I visited schools around the country and met kids who are in foster care, I was not seeing much in the way of literature that really spoke to that experience, especially for the younger ones. So when my editor suggested that I might want to explore that, I agreed that it was time.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It doesn't seem like there's a template to your writing. For instance, you don't always start your books with characters in hard places.

NIKKI GRIMES: No, there is no template to my writing. I just have to go where the story leads and try to do it in a way that's organic. No two stories are the same. If I treated every story the same way every time, I would get bored quickly.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to write *Talkin' About Bessie*?

NIKKI GRIMES: *Talkin' About Bessie* is the result of an editor's request to consider writing a biography about an African American historical figure. So, I came across Bessie Coleman, and I was intrigued not only by her story, but by the fact that faith was an important part of it. At that time, there were no children's biographies on Bessie Coleman. But, when I was done writing the manuscript, I got word that there were two other manuscripts on Bessie in production.

My first writing of *Bessie* was a straight biography, but knowing there were others in the works, I wanted to make sure I took an approach that I felt strongly no one else would take—something that really spoke to my particular skill set. I decided to use multiple voices.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Where did the idea for using multiple voices in *Talkin' About Bessie* originate?

NIKKI GRIMES: The idea came from going to memorial services and coming away feeling that I had a much more rounded sense of that person than I ever knew in life because people from various parts of that person's life were speaking about them, and each person brought another part of the story to life for me. I thought that was a great way to tell the history of a life. So that's what I attempted to do in *Talkin' About Bessie*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Son of Promise, Child of Hope*—your biography of Barack Obama—is also an original approach to telling a life story.

NIKKI GRIMES: Yes. The story is told partly in a series of poems that focus on each aspect of Obama's life. And in between, I have a mother and child responding to that story. A mother tells a story to a child, but the form the story takes is through a series of poems that run through the course of the book. After just about each entry, there's a response from the child and the mother.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What's the story behind your writing of *Son of Promise, Child of Hope*?

NIKKI GRIMES: It's very interesting: I almost didn't write it. I had just told my agent not two weeks before not to bring any new projects to me until I'd had some time to work through some of the projects I was already committed to. She swore she wouldn't bring anything to me, and then two weeks later she did. She said I really should consider the project and included an email from Simon & Schuster requesting that I write a biography of Barack Obama. Today I'm very glad I said yes, but for 48 hours I considered turning it down. Then, I thought better of it.

It was a crash project. I'd never been involved with one of those before. When I worked out my touring schedule, I ended up having three weeks to research and write this book in time for them to get it out when they wanted to. It released the day before the Democratic National Convention. So it was insane.

I could only do secondary research, unfortunately, because there was no time to interview Mr. Obama, who was busy trying to get nominated at the time. But, fortunately, because Obama is such an eloquent writer himself, there's a plethora of material available for me to research from his memoirs, to *The Audacity of Hope*, to many, many speeches and articles written by him and written about him. There was a juvenile biography done of him as a Senator and some other materials. So there was a lot to draw from, and I basically crammed like I was back at college.

I put myself on a reader regime of a minimum of 100 pages a day for the first week and just sort of plowed through and took copious notes. And, usually, when I'm working on something, I'll have several ideas, several possible approaches, and then I'll try out different approaches until I see which one works the best. Well, in this case, I had no time for that. The first idea I came up with (the story within a story) is the one I had to run with and hoped that it worked. And, thank God, it did.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please share your writing process for *Jazmin's Notebook*.

NIKKI GRIMES: *Jazmin's Notebook* began as a collection of stories. I wanted to write about the time that I spent living with my older sister in New York City. Some of our experiences informed the core of *Jazmin's Notebook*. I wasn't thinking initially in terms of a novel, because I was terrified of the very idea of trying to write a novel. I didn't think it was something that I could do. So I thought in terms of a collection of stories.

I was so uncomfortable with the idea of prose that I wrote two-thirds of the book as if each chapter was a really long poem. Then after the poem was written, I reformatted it to go all the way across the page. That exercise helped me see my way through the book. It also taught me that it really doesn't matter how you get a book written. It only matters that you do. And that can be different from book to book, from author to author. Once I'd written two-thirds of the book, I was able to free myself to write all the way across the page without any artifice.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What did you enjoy about writing *Bronx Masquerade*?

NIKKI GRIMES: *Bronx Masquerade* was an incredible challenge. For quite some time, I had wanted to do a book exploring a classroom of high school students during the course of a year, and I knew I wanted to do the book in both poetry and prose. I wanted the poetry to express an aspect of that character that the prose didn't.

Initially, I was thinking very literally of a classroom, so I outlined 33 possible characters and the storylines or issues that each character would deal with. But then when I actually got going with the work, I realized I didn't need 33 stories, because 18 already felt like a classroom to me. So I stopped there and just explored those characters and those stories, and the book came together in a couple of interesting ways.

First, I wrote all the monologues and all the initial poems. Then I set it aside, because I work very much in sort of a jigsaw puzzle process. I don't worry about where things are going. I just work on the individual things that come to me. I had all these individual monologues and matching poems, but I didn't yet know what overriding story they were going to tell. So I set it aside and went on doing other work, including school visits and that sort of thing.

One of the school visits I did was to a local high school, where a poet friend of mine is an English teacher. He was doing a unit on the Harlem Renaissance with a focus on the poetry of the period. He wanted his students to meet a living poet from Harlem who's been influenced by the poets of that period.

While I was there, he held an open mic session, which he'd been doing for several months, and it had become all the rage. Kids from other classrooms were getting passes

to come to his class whenever there was a reading, because they wanted to participate or at least sit in on it. I became really excited about what was going on there with poetry and the memory of that just stayed with me.

I picked up my *Bronx Masquerade* manuscript about six months later and was contemplating what would be the overriding storyline when I remembered that school visit. I realized that an open mic session in my book was a perfect, natural skeleton on which to hang all my monologues and poems.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Are any of the characters from *Bronx Masquerade* particularly still with you and asking to be written about some more?

NIKKI GRIMES: I related to them all; I have to in order to write about them. I have been asked—especially by students—if I’m ever going to do a sequel to *Bronx Masquerade*. I have considered it, and I even have some notes for one. But, I don’t know what millennium I’m actually going to get around to it, but it’s a place I wouldn’t mind going back to at some point in time. In a sequel or companion book, I would pare down the number of characters and maybe explore each one in greater depth.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your Christian faith is clearly important to you.

NIKKI GRIMES: If not for God, I don’t think I’d be here. I wouldn’t have survived my childhood, let alone done well in life. My Christian faith is absolutely central to who I am. It is the grid through which I look at the world and comment on it, so it’s a very important part of who I am and a very important part of my work.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Voices of Christmas* revisits Nativity stories from the *Holy Bible*. You were able to capture so many people we’ve heard of with poems from each character’s perspective; as a whole, the independent tales end up telling the whole story.

NIKKI GRIMES: I love going back to scripture and retelling Bible stories in a fresh way. I love to bring those stories to life by climbing into the skins of the characters and looking at the world through their eyes and telling the stories from their points of view. That’s what the *Voices of Christmas* is all about.

I like to make connections between people who lived thousands of years ago and people walking the street today because we are the same people. Our clothing is different. Our languages might be different. Certainly the places we live are different, but emotionally we’re still the same.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You’ve begun your first chapter book series: The Dyamonde Daniel Book series, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie.

NIKKI GRIMES: I was asked for years by publishers to consider doing a series, but I’m not really series-oriented. The only way I wanted to do a series was if I could figure out a

way to write every single book completely different from every other one, because then it would hold my interest.

I need my work to be challenging to me, and I don't want to keep going over the same ground again and again. I always want to learn and explore something new with every project that I take on. I've designed the Dyamonde Daniel series in that way. While I'll have certain key characters whom you'll see again and again, the stories themselves will be totally different and will present different challenges for me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are the current books in the Dyamonde Daniel series?

NIKKI GRIMES: The first book, *Make Way for Dyamonde Daniel*, introduces the main character and her friend Free. It is about friendship.

The second book is called *Rich*, and the theme of that is the meaning of wealth. Wealth is very relative, so the book includes different perspectives on what wealth really is. One of the title characters in that story is a girl who lives in a homeless shelter who is poor monetarily but rich in talent. So I'm exploring those kinds of themes.

The third book deals with entitlement issues. The fourth deals with body image. Each book has its own theme and its own issues.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your YA book *Dark Sons* is written in verse.

NIKKI GRIMES: *Dark Sons* is one of my favorite books. I've always loved the story of Ishmael. It always felt very contemporary to me every time I came across it, because I have known many young men who have had abandonment issues with their dad, or issues with a stepmother.

I wanted to explore the story of Ishmael for a contemporary audience, so I began working with the story. Then it occurred to me to have a parallel story about a contemporary teen dealing with the same issues as Ishmael. So, the book moves back and forth between biblical times and contemporary times, and it's all poetry. Even though these boys represent worlds that are thousands of miles and years apart, they have a great amount in common, which I thought would appeal to contemporary young men.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The Kerlan Collection at the University of Minnesota is one of the world's great children's literature research collections, and includes books, original manuscripts and illustrations, and many related materials. What does it mean to you to have your work included there?

NIKKI GRIMES: I'm very grateful to the Kerlan Collection. It's wonderful for people who want to know how a children's book is created. It's great for kids. It's great for teachers, for librarians, for anyone who is considering writing books themselves or who just want to understand more about children's literature.

I love the Kerlan Collection because then my work then has value beyond me; my manuscripts have a second life there. People are making wonderful use of it, so I think it's a win-win.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Describe a typical workday.

NIKKI GRIMES: It all depends on what I have on my calendar. When I am home, I write six days a week. I prefer to write in the mornings, so I get up, do devotions, maybe go for a walk, and then I'll start writing. I write in the morning when I am completely clear, and none of the problems of the day have entered in and everything is just quiet. That's my favorite time to write. Students often ask what is my favorite thing about being a writer, and I often tell them working in my pajamas.

I use the rest of the day for the business of writing: correspondence, emailing, website updates, and all those sorts of things.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

NIKKI GRIMES: That doesn't happen very often anymore. But when it does, I have three authors who sort of jumpstart me no matter what. Whenever I read just a little bit of their work, it dislodges whatever has me blocked. Those authors are Lucille Clifton, Gary Soto, and J. California Cooper. For some reason, there's something about their work that takes me back to my own voice. It works for me every time.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You get the privilege of talking to a lot of teachers and librarians. What do you like to tell them?

NIKKI GRIMES: First, I encourage them always to incorporate multicultural literature throughout the curriculum and not to, what I call "ghettoize" literature. That is, to relegate work by African American authors to schools where African American students predominate but to think in broader terms, teaching all of the literature to all of the children, so that everybody has an opportunity to learn about other cultures. I keep plugging that message.

Another thing I talk about is the importance of incorporating poetry throughout the curriculum, because it is a phenomenal tool for literacy—especially for reluctant readers. I encourage teachers to explore the field. I find that people are often hesitant to teach poetry, because they have had a bad experience when they were young in terms of the way it was presented. I like to say if you present poetry as if it were castor oil, no one will like it. Instead, look for poetry that works with your student's poetry and that you enjoy, because your students are going to respond to your attitude more than anything else. If you love it, they're going to pick up on that, and they're going to love it, too.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

NIKKI GRIMES: I talk to them about writing process and particularly about the importance of rewriting, which is always fun. I ask them what kind of sound they make when their teacher asks them to rewrite something, and of course, they all groan.

The most important thing that I have to say to young people, though, is the importance of believing in and stubbornly pursuing their own dreams. I hit on that, because I was not encouraged to write when I was younger. Whenever I would talk about wanting to be a writer, I was laughed at. I was told writers don't come from "around here" and I'll never get published. There were a lot of nay-saying voices, so I learned how important it is to be stubborn about your dreams—to pursue them even if the people you love don't share those dreams. That doesn't mean that your dreams are not valid or that you can't pursue them successfully.

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For more information about Nikki Grimes and her books, go to <http://teachingbooks.net/>. Questions regarding this program should be directed to info@teachingbooks.net.

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