

Profiles and Perspectives

Sylvia M. Vardell and Peggy Oxley

An Interview with Poet Nikki Grimes



Nikki Grimes is the 2006 recipient of the National Council of Teachers of English Excellence in Poetry Award. Grimes, a poet and novelist, has won numerous awards for her writing, including the 2003 Coretta Scott King Author Award, multiple Coretta Scott King Honor Book citations, Books for Youth Editors' Choice, American Library Association Notable Book, Cooperative Children's Book Center Best Choices, Bank Street College Best Books, New York Public Library 100 Books for Reading and Sharing, Chicago Library Best of the Best Books for Kids, NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts, *Horn Book* Fanfare, *Booklist* Editor's Choice, Junior Library Guild Selection, and many more.

In addition to her work for children, which numbers over 50 titles, Grimes has written articles for such magazines as *Essence*, *Today's Christian Woman*, *Book Links*, and *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*. During the 1970s, Nikki coproduced and hosted *The Kid's Show* on WBAI FM in New York. Later, during a six-year stint in Sweden, she hosted their radio program for immigrants and another for Swedish Educational Radio. Grimes has been a performing artist, fiber artist, jeweler, and photographer, and currently lives in Corona, California. We spoke

with her at a recent appearance at the conference of the Texas Library Association in Houston, Texas.

LA: *Tell us about your background and what drew you to poetry.*

NG: *I started writing poetry when I was six. I just loved language, I loved words. I was fascinated with the notion that one word could mean different things. I would do word games and puzzles and jumbles. I'd go to the dictionary and I'd pick out a word and I'd see all the different words I could make out of it and figure out all the different ways I could use a word.*

As for my background, I was born in Harlem and raised in New York City. My first poetry reading was at the Countee Cullen library. They had a poetry reading for young poets and most of them were older than I. My father signed me up for it when I was 13. My first ever. I was shaking in my boots. He just told me to look him in the eye when I was reading. That kind of settled me and I did my first reading.

LA: *Where did your encouragement come from?*

NG: *My dad and my sister later on. I lived with her for a few years in my teens. She was embarrassingly supportive. She was the one who would say, "You're gonna hear from this one." She was great. I would wake her up*

often in the middle of the night, so I could read her a poem that I had written. She never once turned me away. She would rub the sleep from her eyes and sit up and say, "Just give me a minute, Baby."

The way we grew up, she was thrown into the role of mother. She's only four years older than me, but my mother would sometimes leave us alone for two or three days and my sister took charge. I was the baby she took care of.

LA: *When you were growing up, did you find books or poems to which you could relate?*

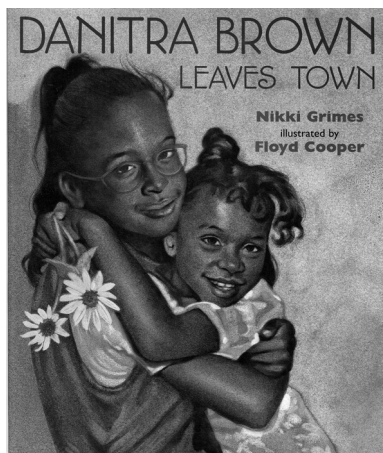
NG: *That was hard. There weren't a lot. No titles even come to mind. Keep in mind, since I grew up in and out of foster homes, I didn't own books. My reading was all in the library—the school library, the public library—and I doubt that I ever read the same book twice. So, I didn't have a favorite author or favorite titles. I just read whatever wasn't nailed down. I would spend hours in the library. When I wasn't there, I was borrowing books. I would take them home, read them, then bring them back. I don't even remember reading a lot of poetry. I remember reading Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, and myths and legends. I read folktales. I read everything. But when I wrote, it came out in poetry.*

LA: *Have there been any poets that have been particularly influential along the way?*

NG: *I didn't really begin to notice influences or have favorites until I was in high school and then it was Kahlil Gibran. I loved his poetry. And of course I loved Langston [Hughes]. I began to study poets later. Don Lee. Nikki Giovanni. Sonia Sanchez. Activist poets. Quincy Troupe. Amiri Baraka. Of course, some of my greatest literary influences weren't poets at all. My first mentor was James Baldwin. My favorite teacher introduced me to his books. Toni Morrison was also important to me. She was very good to me. We even talked about doing books together when she was still at Random House. At that point, I was still planning to write for adults. During that same time, I had a friend who was a radio producer, and she used to read my poetry on her show. Julius Lester used to do that, too. He was another early influence. I toured the college circuit with Nikki Giovanni. I had a couple of ideas for children's books and I thought I would do one or two and then I would go back to writing for adults. I was publishing in adult journals and anthologies. I was on track. Nikki Giovanni and I were doing the same college circuit. That's where I was going, I thought. And then I wrote my first children's book and I got an idea for my second.*

LA: *How did Danitra Brown come to be?*

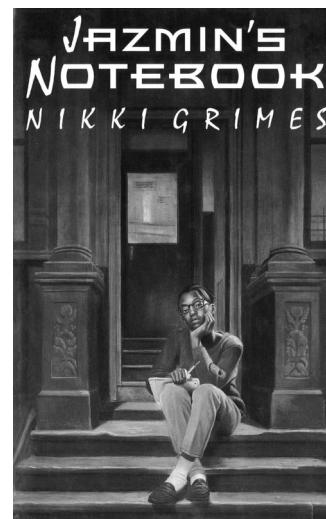
NG: *I'm always looking for names and I found "Danitra" in some Essence magazine article. I couldn't even tell you which one. I was just flipping through it and the name caught my eye. I just went through a list of last*



names in my head that would sound good with it and picked "Brown." And the form of that book was a happy accident. I hadn't done any storytelling through poetry before this. I was trying to write a story about these two best friends and it just wasn't coming out right. I couldn't figure out what was wrong. I finally went through it with a highlighter and I marked up all the passages that were working, and when I looked back over it, I realized that they were all poems. They all wanted to be poems. And I thought, "OK, fine. I will arrange the story, arrange the poems in the order of the telling, add to it, and tell the story." The process is very much that way. You can start out saying, "I'm going to write a collection of short stories," and then along the way you realize that no, really, it is a poem. If you want to do the best work, you have to follow that. Other times, you begin to write a story from a particular point of view and you find it's not working, but another point of view opens it up entirely. It's kind of a trial and error thing in the beginning. You don't know that. You just know something isn't working.

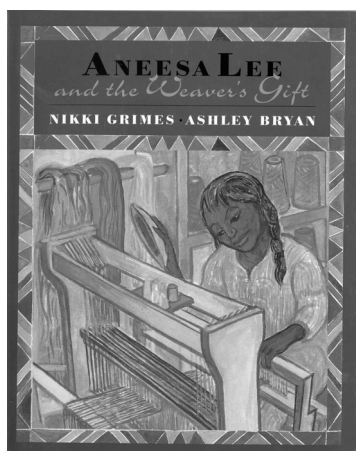
LA: *Tell us about your writing of Dark Sons.*

NG: *Originally, I was just going to write about Ishmael in the Bible. I wanted to write the story for years and tried to find a publisher who responded to the idea. Every single time I'd come across that story in Genesis, it just screamed at me. It just seemed so contemporary, so "now." I knew this kid. I'd seen this kid walking up and down the streets of New York. In every outsider teen who was fatherless, I saw Ishmael. I didn't have to look for this idea, it was just there. I wanted to tell this story. I spent the whole summer working on the first draft and I kept thinking, "This is so contemporary." After the first draft, I thought, "What if I just do a contemporary story and play a little, make sure I drive the point home." I was afraid of overdoing it, though, so I did some things that were different, so Sam's story isn't a perfect mirror of Ishmael's. It also gave me an opportunity to flesh out a fully dimensional contemporary Christian character, which is very important to me.*



LA: *Do you have a routine that you follow in your work life as a writer?*

NG: *It's hard work. Discipline. When I'm home, I write six days a week in the morning, always in the morning. I also have notepads everywhere. All over the house and in my car. In my purse. In my creative process, the words come into my mind, through my arms, to my hands, onto the page. I have to feel the words coming through me. So I write on a yellow pad and then transfer things to a computer. Then I print it out and edit that copy. I don't actually work on the computer.*



LA: *Do you seek advice or criticism from anyone on your work in progress?*

NG: *I have a few friends who are writers and teachers whom I trust implicitly. I give them early drafts of manuscripts to get their feedback. I am also part of an arts group that I've been with for twenty years. It includes writers, performing artists, painters, sculptors, composers, essayists, columnists—all kinds of artists. This group is the one to which I read excerpts of every major work I've ever done. I read and get feedback from them and then*

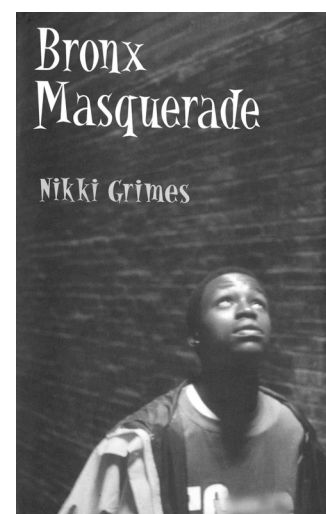
I take the notes and get two or three other people to read my manuscript, too. I'll incorporate all those comments into the final draft. You have to have your work viewed by another set of eyes. No matter how good the editor is, I always have other readers. I'm a very harsh editor of my own work, but I always have a couple of other readers. I want to be sure I've covered my bases and that I am producing the very best book that I can at that time, and having other readers helps me do that. I have these sorts of checks and balances so I can feel confident. Even at that, I'm doing rewrites until my publisher tells me, "Okay, you have to stop now!"

LA: *Looking at current trends, do you think poetry for young people will continue to grow in prominence?*

NG: *I sure hope so. I think some of the best poetry is being written now. And as long as that continues to be the case, I think it will continue to have a place. But it's important to keep the bar high because there's a lot that's being done in the name of poetry that isn't poetry at all. I am really uncomfortable with this label "verse novel" because that's not what I do. I much prefer that my work be called a "novel in poetry" because there are too many so-called verse novels you get fifty pages into without finding a single metaphor. What they're actually writing is broken prose. They think as long as it doesn't go all the way across the page, it's poetry.*

LA: *What comments do young people make about your work to you?*

NG: *I get emails from kids pretty much every day. Many of them say they never liked poetry*



before or they didn't know they liked poetry before and now they do. They get excited about reading it and then they want more. But the other thing that happens is that they feel empowered to begin writing about everyday things. They now feel empowered to write about their own lives when they see that everything is a relevant subject. They're not waiting for some great thing to happen in their lives to be able to write about it.

LA: *Do you have any ideas about guiding teachers and librarians in sharing your books with kids or promoting poetry in general?*

NG: *Well, that's why I have teacher's guides on my website (nikkigrimes.com). The field is so rich now. You can essentially find poetry on any subject that kids would be interested in if you just look for it. I enjoy talking to teachers and librarians, trying to get them beyond feelings of intimidation. Really giving them permission to explore poetry. Because for the most part, it was presented to them so badly that they are either afraid of it or think of it in terms of "shoulds." "You 'should' like this poem."*

And I always say, "Don't 'should' all over me! Just find poetry that you like, that you love, that you get, that you're excited about, because your students are going to pick up on your attitude. I don't care what you share with them, if you have a good attitude about it, they're going to respond to it well. Choose poetry that is going to engage them. Never mind about dissection and all of that. That can come later. And yes, the classics are important, but the classics can wait. Dissection can wait. First, you want to get them hooked on poetry as a genre. 'Cause once they are, try to keep them from reading!" And once teachers have this "permission," they go back to the classroom and say, "Okay, let's try it!" Then I get these emails: "You know what? I tried it. It worked!" They're excited. I think they were just waiting for permission and a way in. I'm not surprised at the wonderful results they're having, but they are. Poetry is just natural for children. It's part of their lives! From the ABCs to Mother Goose to patty cake to jump rope rhymes, poetry is already a part of their lives, so you're just building on that foundation. It's already there.

LA: What does receiving the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children mean to you?

NG: It's an enormous source of encouragement. I'm always pushing myself and trying to make every book better than the last one. I'm always looking for opportunities to try new things. I haven't always felt that my work or that effort was recognized or appreciated, but I kept doing it anyway. I thought, "The test of time will prove it out." So now I'm at the place where the test of time has proven it out. Cool! They did notice after all. It's very gratifying. I've gotten wonderful

cards and emails from colleagues. That always means a great deal to me. When your fellow poets come to you and say, "Congratulations, you deserved it," that means everything.

Nikki Grimes has used her love of language, her fascination with words, and her finely honed poetic artistry to create poems with natural appeal for both children and adults. Young children savor poems like:

HAIKU. A universe of words

painted on the head of a pin.
I stick it in my silk hatband
so others will notice its beauty.¹

They are caught up in the rhythmic beat of poems such as *Shoe Magic* (Orchard, 2000), sure that Grimes is pointing right to them, and they respond, "Yup, that's me!" when they read books such as *Dark Sons* (Hyperion, 2005).

Nikki Grimes is an extraordinary poet and a worthy addition to the roster of recipients of the NCTE Excellence in Poetry Award. Her work reflects her own unique experiences as an African American while touching universal chords in readers across the spectrum. Her manuscripts and materials are now being donated to the Kerlan Collection at the University of Minnesota for scholars to peruse and study. The Kerlan Collection holds manuscripts for seven titles, including *Jazmin's Notebook* and *It's Raining Laughter*.

¹ "Haiku," from *A Pocketful of Poems* by Nikki Grimes. Text copyright © 2001 by Nikki Grimes. Reprinted by permission of Clarion Books, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

Poetry by Nikki Grimes

(1978). *Something on my mind*. Illustrated by Tom Feelings. New York: Dial.

(1993). *From a child's heart*. Illustrated by Brenda Joysmith. East Orange, NJ: Just Us.

(1994). *Meet Danitra Brown*. Illustrated by Floyd Cooper. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

(1995). *"C" is for city*. Illustrated by Pat Cummings. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

(1996). *Come Sunday*. Illustrated by Michael Bryant. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

(1996). *Wild, wild hair*. Illustrated by George Ford. New York: Scholastic.

(1997). *It's raining laughter*. Photographs by Myles Pinkney. New York: Dial.

(1998). *A dime a dozen*. Illustrated by Angelo. New York: Dial.

(1998). *Jazmin's notebook*. New York: Dial.

(1999). *Aneesa Lee and the weaver's gift*. Illustrated by Ashley Bryan. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

(1999). *At break of day*. Illustrated by Paul Morin. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

(1999). *Hopscotch love: A family treasury of love poems*. Illustrated by Melodye Rosales. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

(1999). *My man Blue*. Illustrated by Jerome Lagarrigue. New York: Dial.

(2000). *Is it far to Zanzibar?* Illustrated by Betsy Lewin. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

(2000). *A pocketful of poems*. Illustrated by Javaka Steptoe. New York: Clarion.

(2000). *Shoe magic*. Illustrated by Terry Widener. New York: Orchard.

(2000). *Stepping out with Grandma Mac*. Illustrated by Angelo. New York: Simon & Schuster.

(2001). *Bronx masquerade*. New York: Dial.

(2002). *Danitra Brown leaves town*. Illustrated by Floyd Cooper. New York: HarperCollins.

(2002). *Talkin' 'bout Bessie: The story of aviator Elizabeth Coleman*. Illustrated by E. B. Lewis. New York: Orchard.

(2002). *Under the Christmas tree*. Illustrated by Kadir Nelson. New York: HarperCollins.

(2002). *When daddy prays*. Illustrated by Tim Ladwig. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

(2004). *Tai Chi morning: Snapshots of China*. Illustrated by Ed Young. New York: Cricket.

(2004). *What is goodbye?* Illustrated by Raul Colon. New York: Hyperion.

(2005). *At Jerusalem's gate*. Illustrated by David Frampton. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

(2005). *Danitra Brown, class clown*. Illustrated by E. B. Lewis. New York: HarperCollins.

(2005). *Dark sons*. New York: Jump at the Sun.

(2006). *Thanks a million*. Illustrated by Cozbi A. Cabrera. New York: Greenwillow.

(2006). *Welcome, precious*. Illustrated by Bryan Collier. New York: Orchard.

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GUIDELINES FOR THE NCTE PROMISING RESEARCHER AWARD COMPETITION IN RECOGNITION OF BERNARD O'DONNELL

Eligibility

The **2007 Promising Researcher Award Competition** is open to individuals who have completed dissertations, theses, or initial, independent studies after the dissertations between December 1, 2004, and January 31, 2007. Studies entered into competition should be related to the teaching of English or the language arts, e.g., language development, literature, composition, teacher education/professional development, linguistics, etc., and should have employed a recognized research approach, e.g., historical, ethnographic, interpretive, experimental, etc. In recognition of the fact that the field has changed in recent years, the Committee on Research invites entries from a variety of scholarly perspectives.

Procedures and Deadlines

1. Entrance: Candidates must submit two (2) copies of a manuscript based on their research. Manuscripts should be written in format, style, and length appropriate for submission to a research journal such as *Research in the Teaching of English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, or *Anthropology and Education*. Normal manuscripts range between 25–50 double-spaced pages. (Tables, figures, references, and appendices are considered part of the "manuscript.") All pages must be on standard 8 1/2" x 11" paper, must have at least 1" margins at the top, bottom, and both sides, and must be in a standard font. Manuscripts in any other form (abstracts, dissertation reports, reprints, or published articles, etc.) cannot be considered in this competition. Although manuscripts should conform to the publication standard of the above-mentioned journals, selection as a Promising Researcher does not guarantee eventual publication in those journals.

Manuscripts should be sent to: NCTE, Promising Researcher Award Competition, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096, Attention: Felisa Love. Manuscripts must be received on or before March 1, 2007. Accompanying all manuscripts *must* be a written statement verifying that the research was completed within the specified completion dates. This letter must come from someone other than the candidate (e.g., the major professor or a researcher knowledgeable in the field) who agrees to sponsor the candidate.

2. The *name, current address, position, and telephone number of the entrant* should be transmitted along with the manuscript to facilitate communication between the selection committee and the entrant. *This information should be on the cover page only.*

3. Judging: Manuscripts received on or before **March 1, 2007**, will be transmitted to members of the selection committee for evaluation. Results of the judging will be available after May 15, 2007, and entrants will be notified of the results shortly thereafter. Manuscripts will not be returned to the authors.

4. Summary of Dates and Deadlines:

December 1, 2004 – January 31, 2007

March 1, 2007

May 15, 2007

Completion dates for research entered

Deadline for receipt of manuscripts (two copies)

Results of final judging will be available