KWAME ALEXANDER: Pied Piper of Poetry

by Deb Aronson

Credit: Bettye Smith. Photo taken at Washington, DC Public Library

Kwame Alexander has been known to answer an interview question with a rap: poetry flows in this man's veins. And, luckily for young readers everywhere, he is more than happy to share his passion.

The author of 18 books, including picture books, middle grade books, and poetry collections, Alexander believes in the power of poetry and language to change people's lives. He's an activist about connecting literature and young people everywhere. He's an activist about making sure young people have stories that hold a mirror up to their own lives. Most of all, he's an activist in promoting the power of reading.

Books That Provide a Mirror

As a child, Alexander didn't find that books and poetry assigned in school spoke to him.

"I do not have too many fond memories of literature and language in the public school setting," says Alexander, whose parents both were writers and educators. "The focus was on staid notions of what poetry is."

"I was probably what is called a reluctant reader," he adds, "but it would be more accurate to say I was an *uninterested* reader. At home, it was a different story. We had books like *Things Fall Apart* and *Manchild in the Promised Land*."

Those books mattered to him. They provided a mirror.

"I remember reading a 400-page biography of Muhammed Ali [from his parents' bookshelf] all in one night," he says. "I couldn't put it down."

Alexander's own memories were very much on his mind when he began doing school visits. In a bit of a twist, Alexander started visiting schools before he wrote his first book for young people; his focus was introducing students to the joys and power of poetry.

"You have to be willing to, what I call 'dance naked on the floor,' to put yourself out there," he says. "I shared my own poetry and let them see that I was going to be vulnerable to them. You have to share different types of poetry, that represent not only a window, but poetry that is a mirror, that they can relate to; poetry that is accessible. Make it accessible to us, your reader, and that's a first step to excitement."

When young men approach him, as one did at a school visit in Minneapolis, and say, "Yo. I don't even like books, but I couldn't put yours down," Alexander feels like gold.

At another school in Aurora, Illinois, the books that won the mock Newbery Medal contest every year were always books that girls liked.

"Not that there's anything wrong with that," says Alexander, "but the boys felt left out of the process. This year it was so cool that *The Crossover* won because all the boys came together and voted for it. They were just so full of joy."

Literacy Is More Than a Passive Thing

Alexander takes his role as an activist very seriously.

"Being a writer is more than sitting in a room and writing," says Alexander. "Words are powerful, and literacy is more than a passive thing; it's active."

"If we are going to tell and write real stories about the world and hopefully impact young people, then we have to be out in the world . . . . Being a writer incorporates being a teacher; it incorporates being an activist, whatever that means to you. It incorporates travel."

Alexander has cofounded a special program for Ghana, known as LEAP for Ghana (Literacy, Empowerment, and Action Project). In the Village of Konko he was part of a group that helped to build a library, provided technology, modeled read-alouds for teachers, conducted empowerment training for the girls, and provided a scholarship to high school for one young woman. In 2014, LEAP cohosted a global literacy summit for 300 Ghanaian teachers, who reach thousands of young people. Alexander brought 20 activist/teachers to Ghana that year, including renowned poet Nikki Giovanni, Alexander's teacher and mentor.

"Kids Don't Know They Can't Do It"

Alexander didn't start writing for children until 2009, a year after his second daughter was born. Having been in schools for many years before that, he had the voice of young people in his ear.

But before he wrote for young people, Alexander was a poet and a publisher. Alexander created a publishing company in 1995 with the goal of publishing poetry (including his own). He knew all about the publishing business from his father, who had run a publishing company for many years.

"I learned a great deal, traveled a lot, sold very few books, and really enjoyed the process: editorial, production, all of it," he says.

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Photo: LEAP for Ghana

Kwame Alexander at the LitWorld Girls Club in 2013 with Emefa Ansah, the director, and the girls.

This photo of Kwame Alexander and *The Crossover* was taken by Nataki Hewling (cropped by YARN/ Young Adult Review Network) for the interview "Kwame Alexander: 5 Questions." Find the interview at **yareview.net/2015/04/kwame-alexander-5-questions/**

Newbery Medal and Huck Award

Alexander has made it his mission to reach out to so-called reluctant readers, primarily boys, to make sure they have literature that they can relate to.

The Crossover, a novel in verse, is a good example. *The Crossover* is about a year in the lives of almost-13-year-old, basketball-playing twins, Josh and JB. That year includes great wins and enormous losses for the boys. The book portrays a loving, strong, middle-class black family on solid financial footing.

"Alexander doesn't seem to be pushing a social agenda so much as throwing light upon what must be, in the world of children's literature, a very undertold story," wrote Cornelius Eady in *The New York Times* (5/9/14).

The Crossover received the 2015 Newbery Medal and is a 2015 Honor Book for the first-ever NCTE Huck Award, given in honor of Charlotte Huck, educator and longtime champion of using storybooks to teach reading and language arts (www.ncte.org/awards/charlotte-huck).

Barbara Kiefer, Huck Award Committee Chair, explains in an NCTE On Air interview (See Log On box, next page), that the award recognizes books that "expand children's lives . . . by giving kids a picture of themselves, helping them to see themselves in a book, [exciting] the imagination to see the world in different ways, . . . or helping them enter into other worlds that they may not have known about."

"I am honored and humbled by the Huck Award," Alexander told NCTE. "The idea was to write a book that would impact the lives of young boys and young people who are not interested in reading. By receiving this honor, my assumption is that it must have worked."

Kwame Alexander

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After a decade Alexander moved on and closed the business. But the following year a friend teaching in Detroit called and begged him to come teach her AP English students how to publish a book. Despite his own workload, and because he knew how to make a book "like I knew the back of my hand," Alexander agreed.

"I have a hard time saying no to people," says Alexander. "I'm a 'say yes' person, so I thought, 'Well, what the heck.'"

Soon it transpired that the teacher had only one day in her schedule to offer him, not the originally proposed week. "Well, let's try it," Alexander said. So he worked with the students for a full day. They did everything, including designing the cover, making the bar code, and proofreading the text.

"Kids don't know they can't do it. With their youthful arrogance they just do it. It's a joy," he says.

When Alexander described the project to his wife, she was impressed and suggested he offer the same workshop to other schools. And so, "Book in a Day" (www.bookinaday.org) was born. Alexander has now led the program for 72 schools over nine years, traveling throughout the United States, and to Canada and the Caribbean.

"It's transformative," he says. "Not only can students take ownership of the process, they begin to understand the value of literature at a whole other level."

Book in a Day has another benefit.

"You just published a book in a day, so pretty much you can do anything you set your mind to," he says with a chuckle.

And the collaborative aspect is a bonus: "In the real world no one is doing it by themselves, so it's mirroring the professional experience."

As much as he embraces his work as an activist, there is only so much of Kwame Alexander to go around. Recently, he reached an agreement with Scholastic to create a Book-in-a-Day kit. "It'll be like 'Kwame in a Box,'" he says. This way he can continue to spread the word about poetry and language while still having time at home with his own young daughter, reading her books by writers like Mo Willems, Shel Silverstein, and Nikki Giovanni, that show her both "mirrors" and "windows."

Photo: JoEllen McCarthy

Kwame Alexander conducts workshops, reads his books, and presents at hundreds of schools each year. Here he's shown presenting at Walt Whitman High School in Huntington Station, New York.

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LOG ON

View from History to Homonyms

Visit **http://bit.ly/1OuITOG** to view the **NCTE On Air video "View from History to Homonyms"** and hear winners of the 2015 NCTE Charlotte Huck and Orbis Pictus Honor Awards speak about their work. Speakers include Kwame Alexander (Huck Honor), Cece Bell (Huck Honor), Jen Bryant and Melissa Sweet (Orbis Pictus Honors), Kathy Short (NCTE President), Barbara Keifer (Huck Award Committee Chair), and Cyndi Giorgis (Orbis Pictus Committee Chair).

"Charlotte Huck — Children's Literature in the Classroom"

Read an interview with Charlotte Huck from the November 1997 *Language Arts*. **http://bit.ly/1Mj4fPX**