

# A DISCUSSION & ACTIVITY GUIDE TO

# BRONX MASQUERADE & BETWEEN THE LINES

## BY NIKKI GRIMES





## DEAR EDUCATOR,

Nikki Grimes is a living legend of the children's book world. With one Coretta Scott King Award for her critically acclaimed *Bronx Masquerade* and four other Coretta Scott King Honors, numerous starred reviews, *New York Times* bestseller status, and the 2017 Laura Ingalls Wilder Award for a substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children, Nikki Grimes's work is impressive to say the least.

Whether Grimes is writing picture books, chapter books, middle grade, or YA; poetry or prose; fiction or nonfiction; her stories are both thoughtful and powerful. While all of her books deserve to be talked about in the classroom, we've created discussion questions and activities for you to use with two of her most prominent YA titles—*Bronx Masquerade* and *Between the Lines*.

In a time when children need to not only see themselves reflected in literature, but also to see life from diverse perspectives, we think that these novels will be perfect additions to your classroom discussion. It's our hope that you and your students will love Nikki Grimes's novels and that they will inspire deep discussions within your classroom. Thank you for your continued support of our books and our brand.

**SINCERELY,  
PENGUIN YOUNG READERS SCHOOL & LIBRARY MARKETING TEAM**



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Nikki Grimes** ([nikkigrimes.com](http://nikkigrimes.com)) received the Coretta Scott King Award for *Bronx Masquerade*, and has also received four Coretta Scott King Honors. She has written more than fifty books, including *The Road to Paris*, *Jazmin's Notebook*, the *Dyamonde Daniel* series, and the *New York Times* bestseller *Barack Obama: Son of Promise, Child of Hope*. She lives in Corona, California.

### PRAISE FOR *BRONX MASQUERADE*:

"A flowing, rhythmic portrait of the diversity and individuality of teen characters in a classroom in Anywhere, U.S.A. . . . As always, Grimes gives young people exactly what they're looking for—real characters who show them they are not alone."—*School Library Journal*

"Funny and painful, awkward and abstract . . . Readers will enjoy the lively, smart voices that talk bravely about real issues and secret fears. A fantastic choice."—*Booklist*

"All of the [students], black, Latino, white, male, and female, talk about the unease and alienation endemic to their ages, and they do it in fresh and appealing voices. Rich and complex."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Grimes's creative, contemporary premise will hook teens, and the poems may even inspire readers to try a few of their own."—*Publishers Weekly*

## BRONX MASQUERADE BY NIKKI GRIMES



### About *Bronx Masquerade*:

When Wesley Boone writes a poem for his high school English class, some of his classmates clamor to read their poems aloud too. Soon they're having weekly poetry sessions and, one by one, the eighteen students are opening up and taking on the risky challenge of self-revelation. There's Lupe Alvarin, desperate to have a baby so she will feel loved. Raynard Patterson, hiding a secret behind his silence. Porscha Johnson, needing an outlet for her anger after her mother OD's. Through the poetry they share and narratives in which they reveal their most intimate thoughts about themselves and one another, their words and lives show what lies beneath the skin, behind the eyes, beyond the masquerade.

### Pre-Reading Activity

One major stylistic hallmark of *Bronx Masquerade* is the poems interspersed throughout the narrative—many of which lend themselves easily to the spoken-word style of slam poetry. That said, not all students are familiar with what slam poetry looks and sounds like when it is performed.

### Teachers, facilitate students' understanding of slam poetry through:

- \* Screening a documentary like *Louder Than A Bomb* (2010), which follows the journey of four high school slam poetry teams through the LTAB slam poetry competition in Chicago.
- \* Selecting some poems from the YouTube channels "Button Poetry" and/or "Poetry Slam Inc." to demonstrate to students the style, nature, and subject matter of the works delivered in slam poetry. (Make sure to view the performances before selecting those that best fit the student audience; some poems contain profanity and more mature subject matter that may not be appropriate for all ages/groups of students.)
- \* Asking students, after viewing one or more of the above suggestions, to describe the poems they have viewed. What is the tone of the poem(s); how does the delivery of the poem(s) underscore this tone? What style does the poet use? Is the poem delivered in a smooth, flowing way, or a more staccato, disjointed way, for example? What does this delivery add to the viewer's understanding of the work?

### Reading Activities

1. The premise of the book revolves around one English class's study of the Harlem Renaissance. However, not all students may be familiar with this important cultural and historical movement.

### Teachers, ask students to:

- \* Conduct research on the historical context of the Harlem Renaissance, including the Great Migration.
- \* Select a major figure from the Harlem Renaissance movement and present a brief biography and overview of cultural contributions of their selected figure to the rest of the class. (A reasonably comprehensive list can be found here: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem\\_Renaissance#Notable\\_figures\\_and\\_their\\_works](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem_Renaissance#Notable_figures_and_their_works))
- \* Read some poetry by Langston Hughes (arguably the best-known author of the Harlem Renaissance); for example, "Harlem," "Let America Be America Again," or "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Ask students: what are some common themes of these poems? What do these poems tell us about Hughes's attitude toward the treatment of African Americans in America during this time period? How are these poems still relevant to our world today?

2. The narrative of *Bronx Masquerade* can be somewhat confusing, especially at the outset, as the chapters move quickly between characters.

### Teachers, enhance students' critical reading of the text with the following activity:

- \* As a class, model the next two steps for the character of Tyrone Bittings. Tyrone's character map and poem analysis should be mounted on the wall toward the center of a large area.
- \* Complete a character map. This character map should describe the character's looks, thoughts, personal life,



and attitudes towards others. Students should use the prose monologue to complete this character map.

- \* Complete a poetry analysis of their character's poem. Students should analyze: what is the poem about? What is the tone of the poem? What does this poem tell us about the poem's author?
- \* Break the students into groups or pairs and allow each team to choose a character (or assign them). Have each team complete a character map and poetry analysis for their character.
- \* Hang these maps/poetry analyses on the wall, and use colored yarn or string to indicate connections and relationships between characters, with each color representing a different relationship type.
- \* This would be best started for the first 5 or so non-Tyrone characters (Wesley Boone, Chankara Troupe, Raul Ramirez, Diondra Jordan, and Devon Hope), but could be continued throughout the entire text.

3. Tyrone is the one continuous thread running throughout the book; at the end of each of the chapters, we get Tyrone's personal take on the poem delivered by each one of his classmates. His insights reveal more about the classmate in question, as well as about Tyrone himself.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- \* Read through a chapter of the book—a character's prose monologue, poem, and Tyrone's follow-up reaction.
- \* Complete a RAFT activity for that chapter:
  - \* R=Role: the student assumes the role of the character featured in that chapter.
  - \* A=Audience: the student's assignment should directly address Tyrone
  - \* F=Format: the student should complete the assignment as if writing Tyrone a personal letter
  - \* T=Topic: writing as the character in question, the student should respond to Tyrone's reaction to and assessment of that character's poem. How would s/he react to his feelings about him/her? How might the character answer the questions that Tyrone poses? Students should use both the prose monologue and poem as sources of evidence.

4. On p. 84-85, Devon Hope's poem "Black Box" discusses the different "boxes" he feels society has placed him in, and why none of these boxes really fit him.

**Teachers, ask students to complete a reflective comparison activity. As individuals, students should consider:**

- \* How does society put them into boxes? For example: what type of person do their parents think they are? What type of person do their teachers think they are? What type of person do their friends/peers think they are? What type of person do strangers think they are? For each box that a student describes, they should also be able to explain why they have been placed into these particular categories—is it because of how they talk? Act? Dress? Carry themselves? Etc.
- \* What boxes would they put themselves into? Or, rather, how would they prefer to be categorized, or how would they categorize themselves? Again, students should be able to explain why they would place themselves in each of these categories.
- \* Students should then compare these two sets of boxes. Where/why are there similarities? Where/why are there differences? Is it possible to change the boxes society places them in?

5. The poems within this text follow a wide variety of formats and cover a wide variety of topics. Digging deeper into these poems can help students to understand more about the individuals who are writing them.

**Teachers, ask students to conduct a TP-CASTT for a poem (best done BEFORE they have ever read it):**

- \* T=Title: Have students consider the title and make a prediction about the poem's subject.
- \* P=Paraphrase: Have students translate the poem line-by-line into their own words. Students should look for complete thoughts, and look up any unfamiliar words.
- \* C=Connotation: Students should examine the poem for meaning beyond the surface/literal level. This is where they should take into account figurative language, imagery, sound, metaphor, etc.
- \* A=Attitude/tone: Students should consider the tone or attitude being used by the poem throughout the work. How would this tone/attitude best be described?
- \* S=Shifts: Students should look for any shifts or changes in speaker or attitude. Students should pay attention to key words and punctuation in particular.

- \* T=Title: Students should consider the title again, this time at an interpretive level. What does the title mean? What does it add to students' understanding of the poem?
- \* T=Theme: Students should state what the poem is about (thematic topic) and what the poet is saying about that topic (thematic statement).

Note: it may be best for the teacher to model this with the whole class, prior to having students conduct the activity as individuals, or in partner pairs. A solid graphic organizer for this can be found here: [www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/30738\\_analysis.pdf](http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/30738_analysis.pdf)

6. As a culminating activity, having read each of the monologues and accompanying poems, students should be well prepared to write their own, using the text as a model/guide.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- \* Draft their own personal monologue. This doesn't need to exceed 500 words in length. It should be modeled after those that appear in *Bronx Masquerade*: written in first person, and more closely examining a problem that the student has, comparing public perceptions of the student with the student's perception of themselves, or reflecting on a personal attribute of great importance to the student.
- \* Draft their own slam poems, building off of what was discussed in the personal monologue. This poem can really take whatever form the student would like. For students who are having a tough time getting started, recommend that they look at Raul's poem (p. 22), Diondra's poem (p. 27), or Devon's poem (p. 84) as examples of how to structure their poem, or for thematic topics/ideas.
- \* If desired, the teacher should facilitate an open mike session, similar to the ones that Mr. Ward held in his classroom on Fridays. Students should be encouraged to share their poems or monologues, but should not be required to.

## BETWEEN THE LINES BY NIKKI GRIMES

**About *Between the Lines*:**



This thought-provoking companion to Nikki Grimes's Coretta Scott King Award-winning *Bronx Masquerade* shows the capacity poetry has to express ideas and feelings, and connect us with ourselves and others.

Darrian dreams of writing for the *New York Times*. To hone his skills and learn more about the power of words, he enrolls in Mr. Ward's class, known for its open mike poetry readings and boys vs. girls poetry slam. Everyone in class has something important to say, and in sharing their poetry, they learn that they all face challenges and have a story to tell—whether it's about health problems, aging out of foster care, being bullied for religious beliefs, or having to take on too much responsibility because of an addicted parent. As Darrian and his classmates get to know one another through poetry, they bond over the shared experiences and truth that emerge from their writing, despite their private struggles and outward differences.

**Reading Activities**

1. There are several instances in the text where Mr. Ward guides his students through the writing process. The first of these instances occurs on p. 9, when he introduces them to narrative poetry. Many school curricula don't cover poetry, so students may not be familiar with poetry writing.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- \* Follow Mr. Ward's instructions on prewriting for a narrative poem: "A narrative poem, simply put, is a poem that tells a story. . . . Open your notebooks and, for the next few minutes, I want you to think about a small story, or an anecdote from your childhood, and write about it in a paragraph or two. Keep it simple. . . . It could be a favorite memory of someone in your family, a road trip or vacation that stands out, something that happened in school when you were little. You are the narrator. You choose the story. But keep in mind,



you will be turning this into a poem, so keep the story short” (9). Encourage students to focus on imagery and sensory details. This portion of the activity should take no longer than 30 minutes; any longer, and students may feel indecisive about their topic, or they may write too detailed a story.

- \* Transform these paragraphs into a poem. Before they begin, remind them of Mr. Ward’s advice: “Most people mistakenly think that all poetry has to rhyme. In fact, they use the words *poem* and *rhyme* interchangeably. But rhyme is only one element of some forms of poetry, and there are many forms that don’t employ rhyme at all” (11). If they need a model, have them look at Darrian’s poem on p. 19.

- \* Share their poems with the class, perhaps in an open mike setting, like the ones Mr. Ward hosts. However, sharing should not be required.

2. Li details her experiences as a first-generation American daughter of Chinese-born parents, explaining ways in which she doesn’t really fit in either of the two worlds that she inhabits.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- \* Do some reading about the experiences of other Chinese-Americans. Some starting points would be the transcript of the NPR *All Things Considered* story “Chinese Immigrants’ Kids Play Balancing Role” ([www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=111388928](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=111388928)) and the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. Students should focus their attention on the specific struggles that Chinese-American students face in terms of “belonging” to both the world of their parents and the Western culture they encounter outside their families.

- \* Analyze Li’s poem “Threads” (26). What is “the duality of Li”? What specific struggles does Li face? How does she make the best of these struggles as she attempts to resolve them?

- \* As a potential extension: Students who are first-generation Americans or immigrants themselves should be encouraged (though not required) to share their experiences—including ways in which their struggles have been similar to or different from those that Li speaks about.

3. Valentina is another first-generation student in the text, but her experiences have been quite different from those of her classmate Li.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- \* Read Valentina’s poem “What You Don’t Know” (51).

- \* Use Google Translate to translate the Spanish words from the poem into English—then read the poem through again, all in English this time.

- \* Analyze the poem: Why does Valentina include Spanish words in her poem? What added layer of meaning is lost when Spanish words are read in English? What is the message of Valentina’s poem? What tone has she adopted in this piece, and why is that tone appropriate, given what we know of Valentina’s story?

- \* Compare Valentina’s experiences with those of Li. What is the same? What is different?

4. Marcel’s dad has been in the prison system, which informs quite a lot of Marcel’s anger and difficulty interacting and communicating effectively with his peers.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- \* Reread p. 59-61, in which Marcel details what his father’s life is like now that he has been released from prison. Students should describe this short scene in their own words—what frustrations does Marcel’s father experience? How does Marcel’s father’s attitude/issues impact Marcel and his other family members?

- \* Read the article “You Just Got Out of Prison. Now What?” from the *New York Times Magazine* ([www.nytimes.com/2015/07/19/magazine/you-just-got-out-of-prison-now-what.html?src=longreads](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/19/magazine/you-just-got-out-of-prison-now-what.html?src=longreads))

- \* Consider the special challenges that Marcel’s father and the other convicts in the article face. What are they? Does this seem fair? Why or why not?

- \* Describe how Marcel’s father’s life—and Marcel’s life, by extension—might have turned out differently if he had had the support system offered by Carlos and Roby, as described in the article. How is what these two men do so important? How might these services be extended, to be offered to more former prisoners nationwide?

5. Throughout the text, Grimes name-drops a number of poets—some of which may not be familiar to many students.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- \* Partner up and choose a poet mentioned in the text. These include Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen,

Paul Laurence Dunbar, Pablo Neruda, Geoffrey Chaucer, e.e. cummings, Jean Toomer, William Marr, Ah Xin, Chen Yanqiang, and Li Li.

- \* Research the poet’s life, focusing on major events and writing career.

- \* Read two or more poems by their chosen poet, identify what stands out about the poet’s writing style, word choice, use of imagery, etc.

- \* Consider why this particular poet might be of significance to one or more characters in the text.

- \* Present the biographical context, style analysis, and hypothesis of significance to the rest of the class.

6. Jenesis is perhaps one of the most intriguing and heart-wrenching characters in the book. Though many of the characters come from difficult backgrounds, Jenesis faces a future that is incredibly uncertain.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- \* Evaluate Jenesis’s personal strengths and weaknesses. In what ways is she a strong, functional member of her community? In what areas does Jenesis need more support? (Students should be thinking along the lines of interpersonal relationships, goal-setting, self-confidence, etc.)

- \* Use the resources that Nikki Grimes lays out in the Author’s Note to create a post-secondary plan for Jenesis. At age 18 she will age out of the foster care system—she has a lot of anxiety about what comes next. Grimes provides a list of websites on p. 213 that offer resources for foster children; reviewing the information available on these web pages, students should act as social workers to create a transition plan for Jenesis, so that she can be prepared for success when she turns 18. Students may address the following areas:

- \* Housing

- \* Post-secondary educational opportunities

- \* Job and career support

- \* Money management

- \* Transportation

- \* Healthcare (physical and mental)

- \* Support networks

**Follow-Up Activities**

1. As a culminating activity, having read each of the characters’ monologues and accompanying poems, students should be well prepared to write their own, using the text as a model.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

- \* Draft their own personal monologue. This doesn’t need to exceed 500 words in length. It should be modeled after those that appear in *Between the Lines*: written in first person, and more closely examining a problem that the student has, comparing public perceptions of the student with the student’s perception of themselves, or reflecting on a personal attribute of great importance to the student.

- \* Draft their own slam poems, building off of what was discussed in the personal monologue. This poem can really take whatever form the student would like. For students who are having a tough time getting started, recommend that they look at Kyle’s poem (p. 56), Angela’s poem (p. 156), and/or Jenesis’s poem (p. 161) as examples of how to structure their poem, or for topics and ideas.

- \* If desired, the teacher can facilitate an open mike session, similar to the ones that Mr. Ward held in his classroom on Fridays. Students should be encouraged to share their poems or monologues, but should not be required to.

2. This book brings up a variety of issues that teenagers face across the country—some of which might be unfamiliar to students in your classroom. Some of them have been explored through other activities; those that have not are explored in greater detail here. This activity can be completed individually, or in small groups of 2-3 students.

**Teachers, ask students to:**

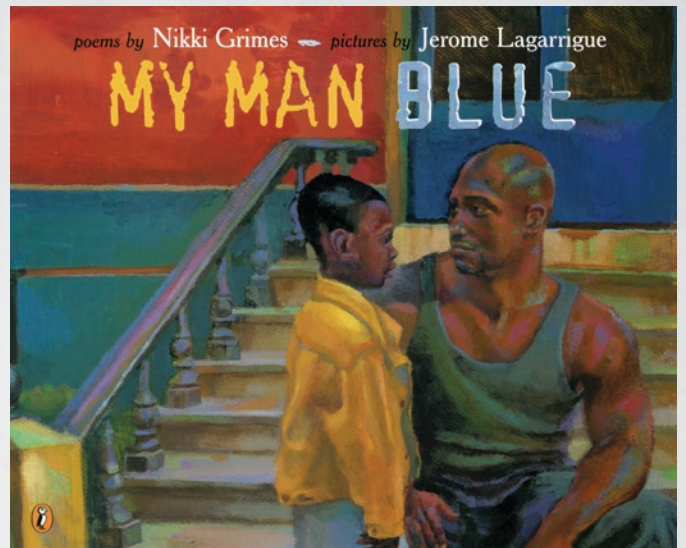
- \* Select one of the issues dealt with in the novel, such as immigration, the foster care system, alcoholism, congenital heart defects, anxiety disorders, opiate addiction, or poverty.

- \* Conduct research on their chosen issue.

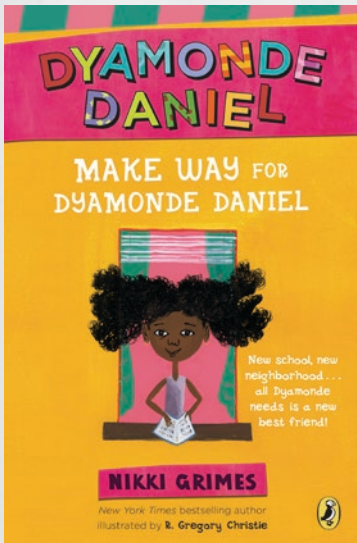
- \* Formulate a journalistic report on the issue, with the aim of sharing the report with the classroom, school, and/or wider community.



# MORE BOOKS BY NIKKI GRIMES



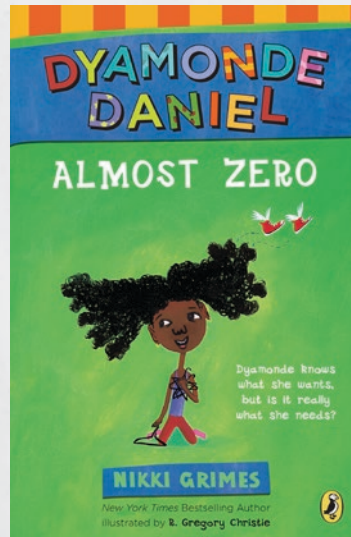
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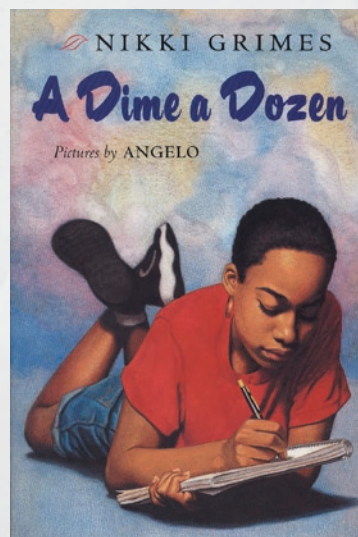
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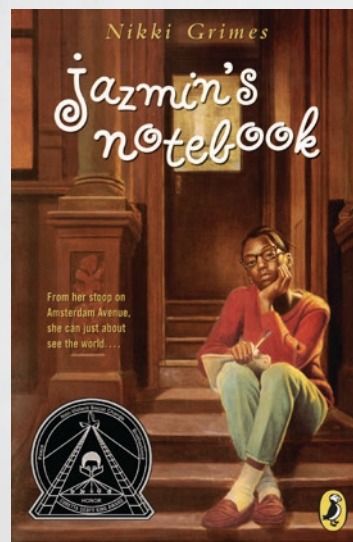
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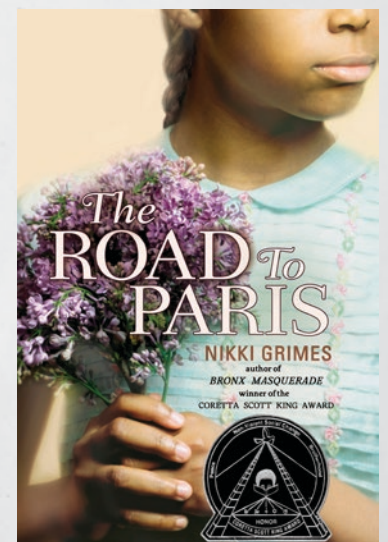
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