Welcome. My name is Doug Biklen. I'm dean of the School of Education here at Syracuse University. I want to welcome you to the first of the 2008, 2009 Landscape of Urban Education lectures here at SU. Our speaker, Nikki Grimes' talk is made possible by a great deal of cooperation in the community. Founders for her being here include the Syracuse City School District, the Syracuse City School District Foundation, our School of Education here at SU, and the Onondaga County Public Library. And one of the purposes of her being here is to bring attention to teen reading week. You're the older teens. [ laughter ]

Our speaker today works hard. This morning I had the chance to hear her speak at Hendricks Chapel to over a thousand eighth graders. By the way, that was the place to be this morning. Who is Nikki Grimes? Best selling author, New York City native, poet, above all she makes her identity as that, poet. But she does a lot of other things, and I'll share a little bit of that with you in a moment. Listening to her this morning, I noted that she reminds us that most of us have written poetry at one point or another in our lives. Probably when we were teenagers. And listening to her this morning reminded me of how much I enjoyed writing poetry as a youth. And of the enjoyment I still get from reading poetry. Most recently that of our speaker. Though I can't say I've kept with it, this business of writing poetry, I like to think, however that some of what I learned from poetry as a youth, about, which included being, being able to be critical, to be frank, to be spare, and to address matters of importance. I like to think that this characterizes at least some of my writing. So, today, maybe you'll be transported back to your days of writing poetry. Nikki Grimes has written a lot, she's done a lot. She has sung at the Stockholm Philharmonic. She had a radio program in Stockholm, Sweden. She also had a radio program at WBAI in New York City. She's an artist, a photographer, a singer, a novelist, a poet. There are lots of things about Nikki Grimes that are there to admire, indeed it's frightening to look at all that she has done and continues to do. One of the things I noted in reading her biography the very brief summary of her biography, is the titles of her works. The Road to Paris, Bronx Masquerade, Jasmine's Notebook, Diner Brown Class Clown, Dinetra Brown Leaves Town, Meet Dinetra Brown, Hopscotch Love, Under the Christmas Tree, What is Good Bye?, Talking About Bessie, Anisa Lee and the Weavers Gift, Childs Heart, A Dime A Dozen, My Man Blue, Come Sunday, At Break Of Day, and When Daddy Prays, Stepping Out With Grandma Mac, Showmen's Magic, A Pocket Full of Poems, Wild, Wild Hair, Portrait of Mary, Malcolm X, A Force of Change. And of course, a book that you have described in a hand out on your chairs and I think I'm allowed to say this in a university without violating IRS rules. I'm so glad you wrote this book about Barack Obama. [ chuckles ] It's a great honor to present to you Nikki Grimes. I know you're going to enjoy it.[clapping]

Thank you. Good afternoon. Good afternoon. [ laughter ]

You can tell where I got the title for Wild, Wild Hair. [ laughter ]

Ever since I was a child I have believed in the power of story telling. I remember, for example, when I was young I read Death Be Not Proud by John Gunther. And when I was done I found a slight nodule on the back of my neck.[ laughter ]

And became absolutely convinced that I had a brain tumor.[ laughter ]
And that my days were numbered. So I showered my mother with a great deal of affection, which made her highly suspicious, because we weren't usually lovey-dovey. She figured I must have done something terribly wrong which I was desperately trying to cover. She just couldn't figure out what. And I remember going to my best friend and giving her my birthstone ring and opal which I loved, because I wanted her to have something to remember me by after I was gone.[ laughter ]

At some point I must have told my mother that I wasn't well, because she took me to see a doctor. Not a psychiatrist, I know what you're thinking.[ laughter ]

The doctor, however, was not much help, because she said the nodule could either be a lymph node or it could be something really serious, or else it could be a lymph node which would disappear on its own. And she suggested that we wait and see. Well as you can imagine, the next few weeks were among the longest of my young life. In the end, a nodule did in fact turn out to be a lymph node. So I went back to ignoring my mother like a healthy little pre-teen. And I went to my best friend and I said.

She forgave me, eventually. But obviously the experience stayed with me and taught me something about the impact of story telling and the power of language. Language is powerful indeed, and poetry is a distillation of that power. I am poetry. I am words syncopated to the nth degree. Langston sang me blue, opera was Shakespeare's choice. He lifted his voice to the strains of clavichord and mandolin then waltzed me from Romeo to Juliet, yet others like Gwendolyn Brooks, Barack and Donnelly rocked me to the beat of jazz and duwop. Hip hop came later. No matter. In a master's hand I can be smooth or sassy. I can coo a sweet tale in the cradle of a lullaby, climb octaves on a symphonic stair, or rip the air like Aretha. Are you the poet? Well, I'm your lyric. Sing me anyway you choose. That was the poem I wrote for the children's book council to help celebrate children's book week. And it speaks to the notion that poetry is the place where words and music meet.

I really love this poem, in fact it's one of my favorites. Now whenever I visit schools, I'm always hit with a barrage of questions about my favorites. Mrs. Grimes, somebody's always giving me a husband that I don't have. Mrs. Grimes they say, what is your favorite color? Which is quickly followed by, Mrs. Grimes what is your favorite subject, sport, pet, state, food, musical instrument, poem, character? Then of course there's always my own personal favorite's question. Ms. Grimes of all your books, which one is your favorite? To which I respond, my books are like my children. If I choose one, all the others would be jealous. Once they finish laughing I tell them that my favorite ones are always the new ones, the most recent book, get to be my favorites until the next one comes out. And so right now that includes my novel, The Road to Paris, the picture Book - Oh Brother, illustrated by Mike Benny, and the picture book biography Barack Obama, Son of Promise, Child of Hope, illustrated by Brian Collard. The truth is, when it comes to favorites, I do have favorite poems or passages in each of my books. And I'd like to share a few of them with you this afternoon. I'll begin with a pair of poems from Dark Sons, my novel about Ishmael, son of Abraham.
Okay. I wasn't going to say this but, a funny thing happened when I was working on this book. I was on the final draft, and there is a poem that takes place, first of all. Okay, it's a novel about Ishmael but its paired poems, and it's about Ishmael and about contemporary teen dealing with the same issues. And in the contemporary section, the main character Sam is, there's a poem that takes place at a prayer meeting at church, and another one at a youth bible study at the pass, the youth pastor's house. And my editor said, you know you might think about maybe pulling back on those poems, because you know, they're religious. And I looked at her, her name was Donna. And I said Donna, Ishmael, Abraham, Genesis that ship has sailed. [laughter]

So those poems are still in there. Okay, the truth is, when it comes to my favorites, I do have favorite poems. All right. I'll begin with poems from Dark Sons, my book on Ishmael. And I have one about him and one about Sam, yeah, okay. This is called Mistake. This is in the voice of Ishmael, and it's a poem about Sarah. I could hate her, and some days I do. This other mother who planned my birth and wished me away. It troubles me to know I was her idea. Is it my fault my birth mother got pregnant in a day, then paraded her swollen belly past Sarah morning, noon and night? Sarah shares the blame. It was she who yearned for a baby. She who wrote my mother into this story. She who gave father permission to bring me into this world. And now that I am here, it is Sarah who lashes me with every stare. Purse her lips when I pass. And spits out here secret name for me, regret. First Sleep Over, this is Sam. It's weird, backpacking into my room, a place as alien as a space station on Mars. I scan the wall where basketball stars preen from posters, hand picked by dad's new wife. This room is all yours she says. Arrange it however you like. I strike a pose of nonchalance then mother thanks. Remembering life long lessons of politeness and courtesy. Sleep well she says and disappears. I kick my shoes off to test the mattress with a 2.5 dot and belly flop. Eyes squeeze shut, I order myself to stop imagining dad and Rachel rubbing up on each other around the corner, down the hall. I crawl under the covers, create a clever mantra to lull myself to sleep. So what it ifs a lie. This is normal. This is normal. This is normal. I write about relationships a lot in my work. And that subject has inspired many a favorite poem. From A Dime A Dozen to Hopscotch Love to When Daddy Prays, here are two of my favorites, from A Dime A Dozen. Some evenings, my father prays before his music stand. And lays hands on his violin as if the wood were holly. We, silent by the stereo, relax while handle preaches a sermon song, through piccolo, cello and base, trombone and kettle drum, I fold my hands and hum until the music fades. Then dad, he gently lifts his bow and plays a violin so low. He shatters heaven's crystal floor with melody that rings so pure the angels pause to listen while I whisper, that's my daddy. You Tiemo [assumed spelling], a poem about my mom. Maybe there is some scientific reason she gets the urge to hug whenever we're jammed together in the rush hour huddle. Thank God she knows better than to cuddle in public. Instead while the train screeches to the next state, she leans down to whisper in my ear [talking in foreign language]. If no one else can hear, I figure it's okay to smile. Don't ask me who she learned that
expression from. But someone must have told my mom that Spanish is the
language of love, because she's been speaking mushy Porto Rican to me for
years.

[ laughter ]

>>The Gift. Outside a flower shop, Jewel waits. Her school bus will
soon come. John Paul, the cute boy next to her nervously starts to hum.
He holds a rosebud in his hand. He twirls the stem and breaks. But
still he offers it to Jewel who giggles first, then takes it. She gently
lays the store bought rose inside her English book. Then times that day
she eyes her gift. And sighs with each long look. Baby Brother from
When Daddy Prays. They sent him home half finished, still scrunched up
like a brown package. They should have ironed him out first if you ask
me. But daddy doesn't seem to notice. Last night he leaned over that
wrinkled creature in the bib, sleeping in what used to be my crib. Make
me a Godly man he said. Help me show this little one exactly how it's
done. I punch my pillow, jealous as could be, until Daddy asked the Lord
to please watch over me. Two of my all time favorite books are What is
Good bye, Poems of Grief, and Ti Chi Morning, Snapshots of China. Ti Chi
Morning is especially close to my heart. Illustrated by Ed Young, it is a
starlight's trouble journal of notes and poetry, photographs and
sketches. The photographs were taken by me, while I was in China in
1988, and the complimentary sketches were done by Ed Young, during one of
his visits to China. As it happens, we were both there at the same time,
but didn't know it. And you say serendipity. The first poem, celebrates
both the visual and the literary arts. I watched a master who they say
practices painting every day. The same stroke over and over and over
again. Capturing the essence of magpie or mountain in a handful of
flourishes. It is a poetry of water color, brief as Hi Cu. A few
strokes and a bird is born, a few more and it sings. Our world grows
smaller every day. What happens in one part of the world, affects us in
another. Books prepare young readers for that reality, and none can do
that more gently or pointedly than poetry. A panda sculpted from
greenery, smiled and waived and offered me a welcoming bouquet. Sun
blistered the portrait of Mao and dappled the square that day. Tortoise
chatter and peels of laughter muffled shouts for democracy. Death cries
and the squeal of tanks were a nightmare yet to be. These days, I'm more
than curious about that cuddly bear. Was he singed by the blaze, that
scared my new friends one night into enemy's square. What is Good Bye is
probably one of my most importa

152
nts books. I created it to give young
readers a tool to grapple with grief. It has also turned out to be a
good tool for counselors and parents looking for a touchstone to connect
with young people who have suffered a loss. Have many favorites in this
collection, but I'll just read three. The book is written in two voices.
That of Jessie, a ten year old boy, and Jeralyn [assumed spelling], his
14 year old sister. They have lost their older brother Jeran [assumed
spelling], and are trying to come to terms with that loss. The Funeral,
Jeralyn. I'm not sure I want to be here. But someone has to take care
of my mother and father who isn't able anymore. Their hurt is like a
tunnel, and all they can see is the dark. It's up to me to keep them
from bumping into walls. So while the preacher speaks and the choir
sheds a tear in the key of C, I hold mommy's hand, rub a circle of
comfort into daddy's back, and squint at the casket from eyes like slits.
There nestled among roses no one wants to smell is Jeran, not a him, but
an it. Some fake container wearing clothes stolen from my brother's
closet. But where is he? I push down the scream that rings in me. Suddenly, I need to believe in heaven. First Fear, Jessie. Me and Lucky two of a kind, boy and dog whimpering, does Jerry mind? She sits by me red-eyed but strong, Jerry says crying is never wrong. Jerry, I ask, will dad diet too? And what about mom? And what about you? Her skinny arms embrace me tight. We're not going anywhere Jess, all right. She seems so sure. Sis never lies. I lean on her and close my eyes. First Fear, Jeralyn. Look at him, head burned in the black cushion of Lucky's coat. Tears rock as rain. How can I tell him I'm afraid? I say, it's okay Jess, I'm sad too. Then wrap my sadness around us both like a blanket and let him curl up in the quiet. I don't tell him I'm worried about mom. I don't tell him my friend's mom lost her baby then lost her mind. Why multiply his fears. They're better divided between us. Okay, it's time to make you laugh now, so I'm switching gears.

[ laughter ]

>>My friends complain, you always make me cry. Like, that's my job.

[ laughter ]

>>Here's a poem from Stepping Out With Grandma Mac, then one from Under The Christmas Tree. Grandma Mac faces the development of the relationship between a sassy young girl, and her complex grandmother. The poems not only paint a picture, but also reveal two distinct personalities. On Sundays I know stepping out with Grandma Mac means wearing my best. So when I show up in a nicely pressed white dress, and matching shoes, and purse, a lecture is not what I expect. Except, it's after Labor Day. And according to Grandma Mac, wearing white is now officially a sin.

[ laughter ]

>>Who cares, I asked, wondering what bible she's been reading. I care, she insists. White is for summer, not for fall. This is not what I call a reasonable explanation. And it's exactly those fancy ideas of hers rubbing off on me that give other kids the notion I think I'm better than everyone else on the block. Like being a kid around here isn't tough enough already. Foreign Bear. Grandma's cooking shows off her southern side. Yams, crab cakes, mustard greens. The kind of food I'm used to. Then she'll go and add some foreigner to the bunch. Today, it's Swedish Herring.

[ laughter ]

>>Taste it, she says, passing me the plate. The strips of fish swim raw in silvery and pickle juices that wrinkle my nose with suspicion. Smells funny, I mumble. Hum, says Grandma. You young folks just don't know what's good. Her eyes dare me to give the fish a try. I sneer on queue. Stab a tinsey scrap and take a bite. Hey, this is good I say. Surviving the adventure, grandma winks at me. See, if you only stick with what you know, you miss out on life. Yeah, well I shoot back, looks like you got that problem licked. Thanks to you my taste buds are going to see the world. Christmas. I love to open presents on Christmas Eve at night. I love to guess the contents then see if I was right. I love the bits of ribbon, the way the endings curl. I love the dainty wrapping just perfect for a girl. I love the tissue paper that teases almost there. So what if I'm now 83, go right ahead and laugh at me and see how much I care.

[ laughter ]

>>I love that poem. There's one more poem in that collection that I love even more. And it's called Christmas Eve. We join the carolers Jingle
Belling down the street. My mom and me, joy to the world and everyone we see along Columbus Avenue. We gain a few sopranos at Mt. Zion where we polish the eve with candlelight. We three kinds of orient are, there to greet us as we slide into the pews. The lights grow dim. I prick my ears and listen for the hymn, oh little town of Bethlehem. I scarcely breath, afraid to break the spell. Oh come, oh come Emanuel. The users pass candles down each pew. Hark the Harold angels sing, and so do we, while first one candle is lit, then two, then three. Away in a manger, two handed I manage to hold my candle still. My heard thundering until the flame is finally passed to me. Angels we have heard on high. Imagining the candle is a straw, I sip its glow, and bow my head to hear the story we all know. Then once dismissed, the crowd and I parade into the night, slightly giddy and primed for miracles. Poetry can be a message, or a massage, it all depends on the poet and the poem. It all depends on the story, the words weaved. Christ crucified lay limp as any sun undone by beating cross and spears. A [inaudible] the one to bear him to a place of rough rock and rest. Perhaps this God knows best. He swabbed away Christ blood with tears, the only bath the Sabbath would allow. Perhaps he chose instead to kiss the master's brow and whisper his good bye. Perhaps he merely wept while tired muscles strained to roll the stone in place. And soldiers sealed it tight to inch by inch lock out the air, hope, light. Poetry can knead the tired muscle of a lonely heart. Reminding us that we don't have to be alone. This is called Common Ground from Bronx Masquerade. On the dark side of the moon, where death comes sooner than expected, at the edge of heartbreak, we both take a leap into the unknown. At the corner of loneliness we dip into a pool of tears and thrash around desperate not to drown. We both reach out for a life preserver. Something to hold on to. Something sturdy. Something new. That's when we see it, a buoy called friendship, bobbing up between us. And we meet there somewhere in the middle. Two or three poems from Oh Brother. And then I'll close with Barack Obama. Mommy remarried and won me a brother. Don't need one I said, but thanks anyway. 

[ laughter ]

>>Guess what? She ignored me.
[ laughter ]

>>Chris moved in today. Imitation Brother. We walk to school, but not together. Chris takes one street, I take another. No way will I ever call him brother. He doesn't even know how to spell my name. Toward the end of the book comes the poem, The Name Game. Chris and his notebook, deep in conversation. Why the concentration? X A V I E R he spells. I peak over his shoulder. Gasp at the number of Xaviers staring from his page. What are you doing? Practicing Chris says, until I get it right. Well, you got it wrong. What? I swipe his pen and write H E R M A N O. Huh? Chris can be slow. It means brother I say. That's my new name now. One you already know how to spell. How do Xavier and Chris move from the first poem to the last? You'll have to read the book to find out.
[ laughter ]

>>Finally, my newest favorite book is Barack Obama, Son of Promise, Child of Hope. For those of you who haven't seen it, here it is. And it spent four weeks on the New York Times Best Seller List.
[ clapping ]

>>My publisher loves me right now.
I'm just going to read a few pages from this, not the whole thing. Barack Obama, Son of Promise, Child of Hope is all about the power of hope. When you read it, maybe you'll think about your own hopes and your own dreams. Maybe you'll realize that nothing is impossible. One day Hope stopped by for a visit. It was early evening and a boy named David sat on the tenement floor glued to the TV. Who's that, the boy asked his mother, pointing to the screen. His mother looked up from a frayed sofa and set her newspaper aside. That's Barack Obama she said. Baraco what? Barack Obama she repeated with a smile. I know it's a mouthful. Anyway he's someone very special. Why? Well for one thing, how come those people are shouting his name? Because he. Are they all his friends? They must be his friends. What's his name again? Boy you are about to wear me out. Sorry, David whispered. The mother patted a spot on the sofa beside her. Com she said, if you sit still, I'll tell you his story. They used to call him Barry. His family stretched from Kansas to Kenya. His momma white as whipped cream, his daddy black as ink. His momma's folks, Gramps and Toot were part of the first family he ever knew. Love was the bridge that held them altogether. I wish grandma and grandpa lived close by said David. So do I said his mother. In Hawaii, breathing in the scent of ginger blossoms, Barry grew, swimming, surfing and spear fishing, next to playmates from places like Portugal, China, India and Japan. And never once did he ask, if all those people could get along. They just did. I see in my class says David. You're right, said his mother. Honolulu looked like heaven. But even though the blue of the sea was sharp enough to slice the sun, and the sun warmed the sand between his toes, and the sand sparkled like diamonds, nothing could fill the whole in Barry's heart once his daddy went away. His mom and Gramps and Toot told him brave and funny tales of his father's past to sooth his hurt and make him laugh. But that didn't stop Barry from feeling sad sometimes. Especially when he heard the word divorce. I miss my dad too said David. I know you do said his mother. Barry's mom married a man named LoLo, and oh the wonderland he took Barry too. Indonesia, a land of pet gibbons and pet crocodiles. Barry laughed himself silly sliding in the rainy season mud. He caught crickets, flew kites and joyed in the jungle at the edge of his new home. A perfect paradise, until the sight of beggars broke his heart. Barry started to wonder will I ever be able to help people like these? Hope hummed deep inside of him. Someday son, someday. For Barack Obama that someday is here. Before you know it, your someday will be here too. And the question is, will you be ready? And if you dream on, and study hard, you will be. Thanks.

I always like to leave time for questions. So I will gladly entertain them. I won't necessarily answer them, but I'll entertain them.

Does anybody have any? I don't bite on Fridays. Thursdays. I'll see when I leave, you'll say, I should have asked her this.

Yes.

I want to [inaudible].

How did I know I wanted to be a writer? I started writing when I was six. And I, I never, I knew I wanted to write. I thought about what I
might do in addition to writing, but I knew that that was what I wanted to do. And it started off just with my fascination with language, with words. I would do jumbles and word puzzles, and make up word games. And the idea that words could be used in different ways, and one word could mean many different things, you know, seemed really fantastical to me. And the notion that somebody could write something funny and 1,000 miles away, somebody could read it and laugh. I thought what could be better than that. That was really powerful. So, I always knew. Now it took a while to convince everybody else. You know. And I had lots of people nay saying me. But yeah, I always knew that that's what I wanted to do. Yes.

>> I wonder if you're invited into schools and, what your experience is like with teachers and kids, that you experience through your work.

>> Yea, I've cut back on, on those. But I do still do some school visits. And it's always very positive experience. And I, it's always nice to hear from teachers afterwards who say they're never that quiet. And I'm like, what?

[ laughter ]

>> But yeah, it's, it's always a good experience. And I, I get some funny questions from them. Because you know, they're kids, they'll ask anything. You know, are you married, are you rich, do you live in a mansion, how old are you? You know the teachers are like, ugh.

[ laughter ]

>> I'm like, it's no biggie, you know, I'm used to it. Yes.

>> Thank you so much. I was struck by your positive early in the talk about the relationship between poetry and music. I'm just dying to see you, you comment on, or sing, or I mean.

[ laughter ]

>> Not going to happen.

[ laughter ]

>> I figured I'd try.

[ laughter ]

>> But nice try.

[ laughter ]

>> But it, it was a natural connection for me because my father was a musician. He was the violinist, and composer. That was a, a true piece about him actually. And, from time to time he would set my poem to music when I was little. And so I always think about poetry and music in connection with each other. I'm always listening for the music in, in a poem. Because I, yeah, the two go hand in hand for me. So. Yes.

>> What message do you have for our children to invite them into poetry and not be so afraid of it in our school children?

>> Well I mean I don't have a message per se. They get it from the poetry themselves. By writing about subjects that concern them about everyday, you know, subject matter. They begin to realize that their lives are viable subjects for poetry, or for any kind of writing for that matter. By just honoring who they are. And honoring their experience. That opens it up for them, you know. I always believed there was just so much talk and you know especially the black community about, you know, children who you know weren't readers, and you know, the system had pretty much written them off. And said oh, they're, you know, they're never going to get it. And I believed if you gave a child a book to wish they can relate, they would do whatever they needed to to be able to read it. They'd grab the dictionary, you know, ask for help, whatever. And,
and my career has absolutely borne that out. One thing I'm constantly hearing from teachers and students alike is, you know, I never liked to read before. I never liked poetry before, but now I do. And it isn't just that, you know, they, they've fallen in love with my books and they don't read anybody else's. They then go on and read other people's. And they get hooked on the genre, they get hooked on reading. You just need to open them up one time, just hook them one time, you know. And then pretty much, you have to work hard to brew that experience. After that they want to read. Yeah.

>> Do you have any other [inaudible] for our bookstore students, or older students?

>> Yes, I have some lists on my website actually.

>> Okay.

>> Yeah, current books, there's a lot of wonderful work out there. It, especially in poetry. You know when I was coming along I, I thought a, I felt like an endangered species for years. And now, the field is so rich that you can literally find a collection on any topic. I don't care if it's, you know, outer space, or math, or whatever, what have you. You know, there are collections of poetry about historical characters, historical, you know, topics. You know, science fiction. I mean it really does run the gambit. Basketball poems, or baseball poems, soccer poem, I mean you name it. So you just look for work that connects with the students your surfing. It's there. If you don't know what to look for, go to the library, use those librarians they have, you know, huge resources. They're great resources. Go to an independent book seller. And I specify independent book seller because they know the books that are out there. They know what's available. Ask them for guidance. They're happy to give it to you.

>> Thank you.

>> Yes.

>> Writers always have a million ideas of what's coming next. What, what are you working on? What are you thinking about [inaudible] next?

>> I just finished a new [inaudible] novel. I'm not quite sure when it's going to come out. I have a new chapter book series that launches next year. I think the first book comes out in the summer. I have just began research for a book of historical fiction on Susan B. Anthony and Harry Tugman. A dialogue between them. There's something else, oh a couple things. I'm doing a Tween novel, which, what am I calling this thing? Tween Love, a Comedy With Tears.

[ laughter ]

>> Gives you an idea of what that's about.

[ laughter ]

>> And this, oh the other one I haven't started yet, I won't talk about that. But yes. So. I have a couple of irons on the fire. Yes.

>> Yes, I, I'd like to hear some of your ideas about the use of [inaudible] and how in the process of honoring, you know, the Latin experiences of young people. I have a good friend in [inaudible] tremendous things. Just honor, you know, rhythm and you know the genius of, of the use of [inaudible]. I'd really love for you to talk about that.

>> I can't talk about it exhaustively because I haven't done a lot with it. But I have a friend named Alan Sidamar [assumed spelling] who has done a whole series of books. And was, he was teacher of the year. And, a couple years ago in California. And he is a phenomenal teacher and has
done some really excellent resource material based on programs he's done in his own classroom. Using hip hop to introduce classic poetry. And, you know, marrying the two, introducing it to, you know, to his student body is more interested in hip hop. By, you know, showing them sort of the relationship between, you know, a lyric by Tupac and then he'll pull out Dylan Thomas and show them where those things are alike. And it's been extremely powerful and effective. So look for him, he's got a whole series of books on hip hop in the high school. And he just did, trying to figure out when it's coming out. He just did a book for Simon Schuster, which is, it's a [inaudible] book about teaching. You know, using hip hop and modern, modern music to teach. And it's got lots of examples, you know of how he did it. And sample exercises you could do and all of that. It's great, great, so look for him. Yes. Yes. >> [Inaudible] about your experience in writing a biography. And [inaudible] research between [inaudible]?
>> Well that was like no other experience. Because this was a crash, publishing calls it crash book. The publisher came to me in December. And said, you want to do this book, we want you to do this book. The only thing is we need it like right away.
[ laughter ]
>>And, and I had already a lot of things on my schedule. And I was working on, you know, other manuscripts at the time. And I just had to drop everything in order to do it. I ended up with three weeks to research and write the first draft of this book. Totally insane. I had hives from head to toe by the end of it, I was so stressed out. But it was, it was complete, it was a God thing. I wouldn't have even taken it on if it, except that I worship a God who lives outside of time. And I figured okay, this is not going to be a problem for you. So I'm counting on you to help me do this.
[ laughter ]
>>And I called up some prayer warrior friends of mine, and I said start praying now and don't stop until I tell you to.
[ laughter ]
>>And I put myself on a reading regime of 100 pages, minimum 100 pages a day. And I read his memoir, and I read, you know, Destiny of Hope. And I read speeches, and listened to audio clips and read quotes and you know, whatever I could find on the internet. I just jammed. I just like cramming this stuff in my head. I felt like I was back at college. Just cramming.
[ laughter ]
>>And I did that for a week. And then I started writing. And usually when I, well first of all, when I've done biographies before I can tell you anything of a historical nature. I spent three to six months just doing research before I even start. So that's how insane this was. And then, with every book, I usually have a few ideas of approaches possible approaches. And I'll try a few of them to see which one works. I had no time for that. So I had to run with the first idea that I had and just pray it was going to work.
[ laughter ]
>>That's all I had time for. For that, that was, this was not a usual kind of a process at all. In contrast, the book I did on Bessie Coleman, yeah, I'm thinking I spent four months just doing research on that. And I don't even know how many times I rewrote it. I originally wrote it just as sort of a straight biography. And then when I, by the time I
finished it, when I first signed on to do the book, there were no biographies for young adults on Bessie Coleman. None in the market place. It was only the Doris Rich books and then some articles here and there. Nothing for young readers at all. By the time I finished that first manuscript, I got word of two other manuscripts in circulation. I didn't know whose they were. I didn't know what they were. But, and I went to my editor and I said, you know, and I told her. I said, do you still want me to write this? She said, well, yours doesn't have to be the only book. Yours only has to be the best.
[laughter]
>>No pressure there.
[laughter]
>>And so I decided what I wanted to do was to tell the story in a way that no one else would. That, that, you know, played to my strengths and that I knew would set it apart from anything anybody else did. And so I, you know, that's when I came up with the idea to tell it in multiple voices, and to do it all in poetry. But that was a really long process. The other biography I did was of Malcolm X and again that one I spent a lot of time just doing, you know, research. Because it's also, you're not just researching the life. You're researching the period. So that you have all those little details of what tree grows in, you know, and what the climate where that person lived and. And all those kinds of things go into the research as well. So when I was working on Bessie, you know, I had to read up on taxes, you know, I had to [inaudible]. I had to know about Chicago, through that period, and the stroll, and you know, all the characters, important political characters who lived during that period, who she was in touch with. And I had to, you know, do research about France where she went to school to study aviation. And I had to learn about aviation. I, I interviewed two female pilots. I had to read up on the mechanics, the math of aviation in order to understand what she had to go through, what she had to learn in order to be able to do this. So I mean, boxes of material I went through for that book. So that was, yeah, that's more normal. What the normal experience would be. Yes.
>> You, I assume, sent to the book to Barack Obama, and have you had any response?
>> Yes and no. Although, Brian and I signed a copy to his daughters, which we sent to Michelle Obama. So I know, and then, you know, the publisher was sending, everybody was sending them copies. So I know that they received them, in addition to which I signed the book at the convention center. And had to sign off on everything that was sold there. So I, you know, that's the only kind of thumbs I got. That was there. Because nobody else was.
[laughter]
>>There were only a handful of books that were sold at that event, and mine was the only [inaudible] books. So. Yes.
>> I talked to [inaudible].
>> What do I find most striking about them? Just that they, you know, they have more potential than we tend to give them credit for. They're just, they're more aware of what's going on in the world than we tend to think. And I'm happy to see that their still dreaming, which is a good thing. So, I don't know if that's a good answer, that's all I can think of right now. So. Any, yes.
I wonder if you've ever gotten [inaudible] not resistance to your work, but have people ever been afraid of the ideas that you've presented? And how have you noticed it? And they're, I don't know [inaudible], but where have they been in there [inaudible].

I haven't really, I haven't really found that. I mean my only problem with, with [inaudible] subject matter has been more with publishers. It took a long time for me to find a publisher who would say yes to the idea of a book on grief for children. I, I mean I've wanted to do that book for years, but they were like no you can't talk about that for children. Meanwhile, children are going to funerals left and right. And they're losing their contemporaries. And you know, like, come on. You know. This is, this is reality. This is area that's needed. So, yeah, it's been more of a fear on their part, or resistance to go to some of the dark places that I go. So.

I want to thank Nikki and thank all of you.

[M00:52:16
[ clapping ]