



**Nikki Grimes** received the 2017 (Laura Ingalls) Wilder Medal for her substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children. She delivered her acceptance remarks at the Newbery-Caldecott-Wilder Banquet on Sunday, June 25, 2017, during the American Library Association Annual Conference.

For more information about the Wilder Award, visit <http://bit.ly/wilder-medal>.



# Wilder

## AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

### A Lifeline Called Hope

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

That is one of my favorite verses of scripture, largely because of the word “hoped.” I’ve long had a fascination with words, and the word with the deepest resonance for me is “hope.” The journey that brought me to this moment would have been cut short without it.

I’ve been meditating on this word a lot, lately. Hope is often thought of or described as something wispy, or ephemeral, a substance one can’t quite grasp. But, in my life, hope has always been less “feather,” and more “lifeline.” I’ve come to count on its sturdiness, and I can’t imagine having made my way through the world otherwise.

When I look back on my body of work, the single most important element I find is hope. The narrator of *One Last Word* hopes to find wisdom and strength for today in the poetry of the past. In *Garvey’s Choice*, a boy hopes to find a way to connect with his father. In *Words with Wings*, Gabriella hopes to find a new friend who will accept and fully embrace the daydreamer that she is. In *Dark*

*Sons*, Ishmael and Sam hope to find favor in the hearts of their fathers, and their God. In *Jazmin’s Notebook*, a young girl hopes to find her voice as she wrestles her memories to the page, and captures them with words. Hope is the single thread that ties all of my works together, and that’s as it should be.

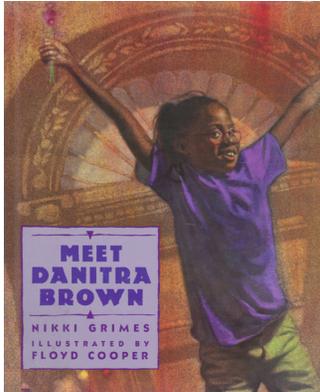
It’s a miracle that I am here, at all. A child at risk, from a broken home, I banged around from one foster home to another for years. When my mother remarried and I went back to live with her, I had to survive the turmoil of her alcoholism and mental illness, my stepfather’s abuse, and the death of my father, who was my best friend. In all those years, writing was my engine, and hope and faith were my fuel. Along the way, I was blessed with people who helped to keep my tank full.

There was my 10th grade English teacher, Evelyn Wexler, a Holocaust survivor who taught me that I could rise above my circumstances, and who gave me my first B-minus on a composition. A B-minus! I was appalled, and demanded an explanation. “If you want an A-plus in my class,” she informed me, “you’ll have

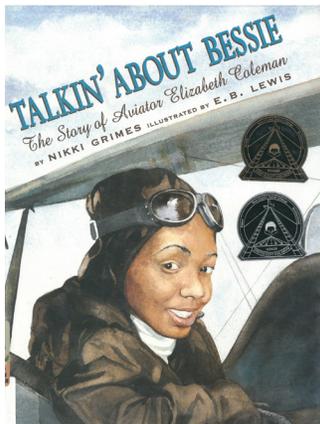
*New York Times* bestselling author Nikki Grimes is the recipient of the 2017 Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, 2016 Virginia Hamilton Literary Award, and 2006 NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. Her distinguished works include the much-honored books *Garvey’s Choice*, ALA Notable book *What Is Goodbye?*, Coretta Scott King Award winner *Bronx Masquerade*, and Coretta Scott King Author Honor Books *Jazmin’s Notebook*, *Talkin’ about Bessie*, *Dark Sons*, *Words with Wings*, and *The Road to Paris*. Her most recent book is *One Last Word: Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance*. Creator of the popular *Meet Danitra Brown*, Ms. Grimes lives in Corona, California.



SELECTED TITLES  
BY NIKKI GRIMES



*Meet Danitra Brown*  
Grimes, Nikki  
Illus. by Floyd Cooper  
Scholastic, 1984



*Talkin' about Bessie:  
The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman*  
Grimes, Nikki  
Illus. by E.B. Lewis  
Orchard Books/Scholastic, 2002

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to dig in and do the very best writing of which you're capable." As my Jewish friends would say, she did me a great *mitzvah*, teaching me that good enough isn't, and that I should always seek to raise the bar in my work.

Then there was James Baldwin, my favorite author, who mentored me for a year and a half during a brief stay in America. With their help, and the support of my sister, I went on to finish high school and, eventually, college.

There was Nikki Giovanni, who I met in a workshop at Columbia, and Toni Cade Bambara, and Sonya Sanchez, all of whom treated me like their little sister, coaxing me along at every step. There was Julius Lester who told me to keep my chin up, and Arnold Adoff, who offered to shop around my manuscripts while he was shopping his own. There was Toni Morrison who, while still an editor at Random House, discussed writing projects of mine she took an interest in. Her faith in my talent was an enormous source of encouragement. And there was my sister, Carol, who would not stop telling everyone she met that her baby sister was a genius, no matter how much it embarrassed me. Each of these poured into my reservoir of hope and helped to keep it replenished. And so, I kept writing, and moving forward.

I performed my poetry at coffee houses during open mic, and eventually, became part of the regular line-up at The Last Poets coffee house and The Nuyorican Poets Cafe. I published poetry in adult literary journals like *Callaloo*, *Drum*, and *The Greenfield Review*, edited by one Joseph Bruchac, and later hit the college circuit, reading my poetry alongside Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, and Jayne Cortez.

By the time I was in my twenties, I was on a clear trajectory to create collections of poetry and short stories for adults. And I dreamed of someday penning The Great American Novel.

I had a couple of ideas for books for children, and my thinking was that I'd dash them off because, as everyone knows, writing books for children is so easy, right? Afterwards, I'd go back to working on The Great American Novel.

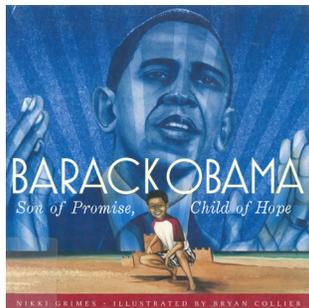
It's okay to laugh at my plans. God certainly did, though I didn't hear him, at the time. I was too busy figuring out how the children's book market worked. To do that, I reviewed children's books for several book review services, including the *Bulletin* of the Council on Interracial Books for Children. Brad Chambers was the head honcho, back then, and once I figured out that Dial was the publisher most likely to be interested in the kinds of stories I wanted to write, I started bugging Brad to arrange an introduction with the one and only Phyllis Fogelman. Brad thought the idea preposterous, of course, and tried to convince me to submit my work to a more junior editor, but I was having none of that. I'd already gotten it into my head that, if I were going to be rejected, I wanted it to be from the person at the top. When Brad wasn't able to dissuade me, he suggested a senior editor, but I still wouldn't bite.

Did I mention my stubbornness from an early age? Well, I needled poor Brad until he finally caved and put in a call to Phyllis. He was shocked when Phyllis agreed to look at my work, and even more surprised when she eventually called me in for a meeting.

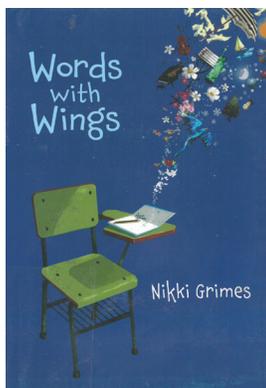
At that point, I had a collection of what I thought were short stories about a friendship between a girl



SELECTED TITLES  
BY NIKKI GRIMES



***Barack Obama:  
Son of Promise, Child of Hope***  
Grimes, Nikki  
Illus. by Bryan Collier  
Simon & Schuster, 2008



***Words with Wings***  
Grimes, Nikki  
Wordsong/Highlights, 2013

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named Pump, short for Pumpkin, and a boy named Jim Jim.

Phyllis liked what she saw, but said more stories were needed, and suggested that, perhaps, I could come up with a thread that connected them all. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how Phyllis Fogelman got me to write a novel without ever using the word!

In 1977, *Growin'*, my debut book for young readers, was born.

Many books have followed since, and I'm long past planning a career in books for adults. And guess what? God's not laughing, anymore. Instead, he is smiling because I've taken the hope he planted inside me, and I've carefully wrapped it in age-appropriate lyrical language to share with young readers as sorely in need of hope as I once was.

The world is a difficult and dangerous place, these days, and our chil-

dren need all the wonder, beauty, and hope we can offer. We all have a part in this critical work.

Thanks to Chair Starr LaTronica, and all the members of the 2017 Laura Ingalls Wilder Award committee for this honor. Thanks to my foster brother, Kendall Buchanan, for being here to represent the family who gave me a loving and secure home in which my writing life could begin. Thanks to agent Elizabeth Harding, my cheerleader-in-chief. Thanks to the many editors who help me to make my books the best they can be, and thanks to all of you for putting those books into the hands of the children who need them.

God has blessed me richly, and I hope he will, in turn, bless you.



Association for Library Service to Children

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