

GARVEY'S CHOICE

NIKKI GRIMES

Children's Literature Legacy Award winner

An Educator /
Discussion Guide



ABOUT THE BOOK

This emotionally resonant novel in verse by award-winning author Nikki Grimes celebrates choosing to be true to yourself.

Garvey's father has always wanted Garvey to be athletic, but Garvey is interested in astronomy, science fiction, reading—anything but sports. Feeling like a failure, he comforts himself with food. Garvey is kind, funny, smart, a loyal friend, and he is also overweight, teased by bullies, and lonely. When his only friend encourages him to join the school chorus, Garvey's life changes. The chorus finds a new soloist in Garvey, and through chorus, Garvey finds a way to accept himself, and a way to finally reach his distant father—by speaking the language of music instead of the language of sports.

A Kirkus Reviews Best Book of the Year

A School Library Journal Best Book of the Year

★ “Grimes returns to the novel-in-verse format, creating voice, characters, and plot in a series of pithy tanka poems, a traditional Japanese form similar to haiku, but using five lines . . . (w)ritten from Garvey's point of view, the succinct verses convey the narrative as well as his emotions with brevity, clarity, and finesse.”—*Booklist*

★ “(A) sensitively written middle grade novel in verse. . . (readers) will fall hard for Garvey, a tender, sincere boy who dislikes athletics. Grimes writes about adolescent friendships in a way that feels deeply human. A short, sweet, satisfying novel in verse that educators and readers alike will love.”—*School Library Journal*

★ “This compassionate, courageous, and hopeful novel explores the constraints placed on black male identity and the corresponding pains and struggles that follow when a young black boy must confront these realities both at home and in school . . . delivers a sincere, authentic story of resilience and finding one’s voice.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

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PRE-READING:

SETTING THE STAGE

Before sharing this book, talk about how we all struggle with other people’s expectations of us. Sometimes it’s the expectations of family members and sometimes it is friends or teachers or others who have opinions about who we are and how we should act. Talk about how this book offers a look at one boy’s struggle with the expectations of his father through the lens of poetry, with each page being a tanka poem, some just one stanza and others consisting of several stanzas. Challenge them to consider each character’s point of view as Garvey tells his story through poems.

CHARACTERS, NAMES AND NICKNAMES

As students read or listen to this verse novel, encourage them to visualize each of the main characters and talk about what they look like and how they talk and act. Work together to draw character sketches or find magazine or web-based images that look like how they envision each of these characters:

Garvey

Dad

Mom

Angela/Angie (Garvey’s big sister)

Joe (Garvey’s friend)

Emmanuel/Manny (Garvey’s new friend)

Chorus teacher

Names, nicknames, and name-calling are an important part of this story. To begin, Garvey is named after the historic personage Marcus Garvey, as indicated in “Rhymes with Harvey” (p. 9). Challenge students to research who Marcus Garvey is and why Garvey might be named after

him. Challenge students to find out the derivation or story behind their own names or nicknames. Possible sources for examining naming derivations and trends include:

BabyNames.com

Parents.com/baby-names/

Babble.com/baby-names/

NICKNAMES AND NAME-CALLING

Next, talk with students about how nicknames can be endearing or insulting, depending on the context. Garvey endures many insulting nicknames because of his larger size (e.g., “fatso,” “lard butt,” Mister Tubs,” “Two Ton,” “Sweet Chunk,” “Chocolate Chunk,” “A-Round,” “little piggy”). Even his big sister calls him names that she thinks are funny, but slowly Garvey reveals that they’re hurtful to him. Challenge students to consider how they address one another and how they might handle things when they are called something they do NOT like to be called. Grimes provides guidance for young people about this in these poems:

“Advice” (p. 66) with the lines:

“Choose the name you answer to. / No one can do that but you.”

“His Words” (p. 67) with the lines: “. . . ignore / the kids who don’t know my name”

“The Change Bell (p. 84) with the lines: “I choose what words to let in”

“Good Company” (p. 86) with the lines: “My mom says, / ‘Shine your light, no one will care / what size candle holds the flame.’

FATHERS AND SONS

One of the major conflicts in Garvey’s story is his conflict with his father about the expectations his dad has for him, particularly regarding participating in organized sports and his concerns about Garvey’s weight. Invite students to trace the evolving relationship of father and son through the poems in the book. Challenge them to find a poem that shows the initial tension between them, the dawning of understanding, emerging details of things Garvey and his dad might have in common, and the final conclusion of their mutual interest in music. Possible examples include:

“Origami” (p. 2)

“Angie” (p. 3)

“Mom Speaks” (p. 7)

“Late-Night Snack” (p. 36)

“Secret” (p. 40)

“New Fan” (p. 93)

“Turn Around” (p. 101)

“The Talk” (p. 104)

READING ALOUD

Talk about how the poet uses titles for each poem setting the stage for each page of the story. If you only read the titles of the poems (and not the poems themselves), what do you surmise about the story (before or after reading the book)? Try it. Read the book aloud as a group with the titles ONLY by passing the book around the class. How do the titles alone set the stage or move the story along?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

As students read or listen to *Garvey's Choice*, invite them to consider the relationships, conflicts, and surprises in the story. Ask open-ended questions that motivate them to dig deep and challenge them to find poems or passages that support their opinions or analysis. Possible discussion questions include:

How do Garvey and Joe (and Manny) keep their friendship strong?

How do Garvey's friends help him see himself in different ways? Grimes writes, "Do friends make better mirrors?" (p. 14). How might that be true?

Why is "Garvey's Choice" on page 54 the titular poem? What is so important about this poem?

Why is music and singing so important to Garvey?

How does Garvey handle the tension with his father?

What can you do when a good friend is being called names or being bullied?

How does your family shape what you're like? How do your friends shape what you're like?

How is that the same or different?

How can kids show courage?

What can young people teach adults?

Encourage students to cite lines or examples from the poems in this novel in verse to support their responses.

READERS' THEATER

Another distinctive feature of this book is the use of dialogue indicated by quotation marks when someone is speaking within the poems. This creates the sense that characters are speaking to one another in the poem which can be very effective when read aloud. Try readers'

theater performance, so that students can get a sense of the characters' voices. Select poems with two parts: plain text and dialogue within quotation marks for two volunteers or two groups to read aloud in turn. Then talk about how that helps us understand the poem and the points of view better. Here are poems with dialogue that particularly lend themselves to readers theater performance:

"Mom Speaks" p.7
"Knock, Knock" p. 15
"Phone Call" p. 19
"Saturday Play" p. 21
"Secret" p. 40
"Limits" p. 42
"Photo Album" p. 44
"Morning Classes" p. 46
"Turtle" p. 50
"Garvey's Choice" p. 54
"Pact" p. 56
"Pink Eyes" p. 58
"Emmanuel" p. 59
"Saturday Catch-Up" p. 60
"It's Manny, Now" p. 61
"Careful, Now" p. 63
"Eliana" p. 64
"Advice" p. 66
"Name Game" p. 69
"High School Half Day" p. 77
"Preparation" p. 82
"Good Company" p. 86
"Compliments" p. 94
"Turn Around" p. 101
"First Contact" p. 103
"The Talk" p. 104

Use recording app to tape the choral reading of your favorite poems. Share your recording during morning announcements or at a parent meeting just for fun.

WORDS OF WISDOM

Garvey is happy to have a very good friend in Joe and makes a new friend (Manny) in the story, too. Encourage students to identify poems that communicate the value of friendship and show these friends in action. Talk about why friends are important in life and how true friends accept us as we are, as well as help us be our best selves. Conversely, Garvey truly struggles

with body image issues and is unhappy about being overweight and teased about it too. It's his friends who help him make peace with who he is and discover new talents (singing) that help him blossom. Several characters offer Garvey advice along the way. Challenge students to identify a key line, phrase, or passage that is pivotal to the story or meaningful to them and talk about why. Possible examples include:

"This is me. Get over it." (p. 58)

"Do friends make better mirrors?" (p. 14)

"pay attention / to the kid in my own eyes" (p. 74)

"I choose what words to let in" (p. 84)

". . . ignore / the kids who don't know my name" (p. 67)

"Shine your light, no one will care / what size candle holds the flame." (p. 86)

"the perfect size is happy" (p. 99)

Encourage students to choose their favorite line as a personal motto and then create simple band bracelets or make a button and write their mottos on them.

POEM FORM: TANKA

Grimes uses the tanka form of poetry for every poem in this book. Share the author's note about the tanka on page 107 and talk about the components of this form: the five lines, designated syllables for each line, communicating mood and story. Use one sample poem such as "Summer Lost and Found" (p. 4) to identify all the components. In addition, Grimes incorporates rhyme in some of the poems, but others have no rhyme. Create a simple table with two columns and challenge students to find 5 examples of each: tanka with rhyme and tanka without rhyme. Grimes even employs internal rhyme with rhyming words within the same line. See if students can find one example of internal rhyme! Then, after reading and discussing the form of the tanka poem and examining many examples, encourage them to try writing their own five-line tanka poem following the syllable count that Grimes uses. Encourage them to share their poems too.

CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

MUSIC

Music is a very important part of *Garvey's Choice* and Grimes weaves several references to songs and music throughout this novel in verse, with a particular emphasis on the music of the singer Luther Vandross and also Natasha Bedingfield. Work with students to learn more about the music and lives of these musicians including checking their individual websites that include some audio tracks:

luthervandross.com

natashabedingfield.com

Why might Grimes have singled out these two singers for Garvey's story? Why is their music important to Garvey?

Garvey's interest in music comes to the forefront and he finds his voice when he steps up and joins the school chorus and even performs a solo. Talk about how singing helps him begin to gain confidence and helps him connect with his father. Identify poems or excerpts that focus on music and singing such as:

"Who knew music could be work?" (p. 83)

"Live inside the song" (p. 89)

"I used to sing in a band" (p. 104)

SCIENCE

From the beginning, we see that Garvey loves astronomy, space, and science fiction. Invite your science fans to identify the poems or poem lines with a science or space focus. This might include "Stars" (p. 5), "Me and Joe" (p. 16), and "Word Web" (p. 81), among many others, as well as references to the television show, "Star Trek" and the classic science fiction novel, *Have Space Suit—Will Travel* by Robert Heinlein. Encourage your science-loving students to share their own favorite books, games, programs, and science interests. Is it surprising that a person who loves science would also love music? Why or why not? Talk about how each of us can have many interests and talents.

SPORTS, GAMES, AND HOBBIES

One of the conflicts in this story is Garvey's lack of interest in participating in organized sports like football or basketball, despite his father's desire that he do so. Which poems depict this struggle? However, Garvey does enjoy the game of chess and plays it with his friend Joe and does do some running with Joe, too. Brainstorm with students the sports, games, and hobbies that interest them and make a class list of their current activities. Which have they tried and abandoned? Which would they like to try, but haven't yet? Talk about how these kinds of activities can be a fun outlet outside of school, provide physical and mental exercise, and offer opportunities to participate in team activities and competitions.

COOKING, FOOD, AND COOKBOOKS

Garvey makes a new friend, Emmanuel or Manny, who loves food and cooking and wants to be a chef when he grows up (despite his father's resistance). Invite students to create a list of the many foods included in the poems and talk about which ones they have tried and which ones they have not yet tried. If possible, bring a cookbook for young people, like *Cool Kids Cook: Fresh & Fit* by Eliana (cited in the poems) and watch an excerpt or episode of the television program, *MasterChef Junior* (also cited in the poems) and talk about how kids can cook (with supervision) and try new foods too. For books that combine poetry and cooking, look for Jorge

Argueta's bilingual "cooking poems" in picture book form presented in both English and Spanish:

Sopa de frijoles: Bean Soup

Arroz con leche: Rice Pudding

Guacamole: Un poema para cocinar

Tamalitos: Un poema para cocinar

Salsa: Un poema para cocinar

ABOUT THE POET

nikkigrimes.com

Talk with students about the author of this book and how she is the creator all of these poems. You can find out more about the author Nikki Grimes at her website, including current news, writing tips, photos and art, and much more. She also keeps two occasional blogs, "Nikki Sounds Off" and "Backstory", both found on her website, nikkigrimes.com.

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