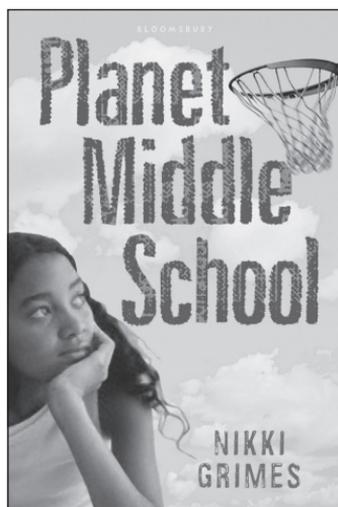


Teacher's Guide

PLANET MIDDLE SCHOOL

by Nikki Grimes



COMING September 2011

Middle-grade novel • $5\frac{1}{16} \times 7\frac{3}{4}$ • 150 pages
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For twelve years, Joylin Johnson's life has been just fine, thank you very much. A little basketball with the guys from the neighborhood was all it took to put a smile on her face. Baggy jeans, tee shirt, and hair in a ponytail were easy choices. And then suddenly the world turns upside down, and everything changes. Her best girl friend is flirting with her best guy friend. Her clothes seem all wrong. Worst of all, there's this one guy, Santiago, who appears from . . . where? Who is Joylin becoming to get his attention? Told in spare, engaging verse, Joylin's story of growing up is made unique by Nikki Grimes's signature sensitivity, warmth, and humor.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. What first inspired Joylin's story?
2. Do you plan out your major plot points before you begin writing or do you just jump in and see where it leads you?
3. What is the best piece of writing advice you ever received? What advice would you give to young writers?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

New York Times bestselling author Nikki Grimes is the recipient of the 2006 NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. Her distinguished works include ALA Notable book, *What is Goodbye?*, the novels *Jazmin's Notebook*, *Dark Sons*, and *The Road to Paris* (Coretta Scott King Author Honor Books). Creator of the popular *Meet Danitra Brown*, Ms. Grimes lives in Corona, California.

PRE-READING:

What is the most difficult thing about middle school? Have you ever tried to change who you are to be accepted by others? Does it work?

DISCUSSION GUIDE:

1. What is the conflict that opens the story? What feeling (or tone) best describes the first poem?
2. Describe Joylin. Why does her name not exactly fit her? Does yours fit you?
3. Compare and contrast Joylin's friends Jake and KeeLee. What does she share with each of them? Who do you think has the most difficulty fitting in of the three of them? Why?
4. Who is Caden? Why does Joy's dad seem uninterested in his son's gifts? How does Joy's mother feel about her husband's treatment of her children?
5. What are the changes Joylin tries to avoid? Is it even possible? What changes would you avoid if you could? What changes come along for both young men and women that are unavoidable?
6. Why does it feel like "Planet Middle School" to Joylin? What connections do you have with her feelings or some of the details of her life?
7. How is KeeLee beginning to change? Can friendships survive inevitable changes? What advice would you give friends?
8. Describe Joylin's family life. What conflicts reside there? Do you think it would be a good family to grow up in? If not, why not?
9. At first, Joylin is irritated that her friends are noticing the opposite sex but then she seems incapable of ignoring them as well. Is there any way to avoid these new feelings? What's the best way to deal with them?
10. Joy and Caden are both stubborn. How? What traits (both good and bad) are woven through your own family?

11. Describe Santiago. What does Joylin think he wants in a girl? How does she attempt to become that girl?

12. Explain what happens when Joy starts wearing heels, make-up and skirts to school. Are embarrassing moments an unavoidable part of growing up? What's the best way to survive them? With whom would you share your most embarrassing moment?

13. How do things change between Joy and Jake both on and off the court? Why does she not want her two friends to be attracted to one another?

14. Why does Joylin's mom answer "finally" when Joylin says she wants to get her ears pierced? What would make your mom have a similar reaction to something you said?

15. KeeLee says to Joy, "You used to know exactly/ what you want/ to wear/ to do/ to listen to" but suddenly she has so many doubts. Why do you think self-doubt is such a symptom of growing up? What can help you maintain your confidence?

16. Why does black nail polish lead to a tiff between Joy and KeeLee? How is it resolved? How do you fix arguments with your friends and family?

17. What finally opens Caden's father's eyes to his son's true gifts? Why is this an example of what Joylin needs to do for herself? What incident opens Joy's eyes to what is really important in life?

18. Joylin has some hilarious scenes of daydreaming in class. Does everyone daydream? Why? Do you think daydreaming could be good for you? What purpose do you think it serves people?

19. In the end, does Joy finally confide in her mother about what has been happening? How does seeing Santiago on the court with another girl make Joy realize her mistakes?

20. Why do you think the author decided to tell this story in verse? What does it add to the story? Which poem is your favorite? Why?

PROJECTS:

Reading:

Comprehension: After the first six poems create a list of everything you know about Joylin. Then, make predictions about what you think might happen to her and why.

Fluency:

Poetry is the perfect venue to improve your reading fluency. Choose your favorite poem and then practice reading it over and over until every word spills from your lips like lyrics. Don't memorize it but rely on the words to build your automaticity with these words. Read in pairs when you're confident how great you sound!

Vocabulary:

Find at least three words that you do not recognize as you read the novel. Try to determine what those words mean by using the context of the sentence. Then, try to use that word later the same day. Not only will it impress your teacher/mom/sister but it will give you great practice!

Writing:

Write three poems that tell your own story about change. Study how Nikki Grimes uses various poetic elements to bring her poetry to life. Specifically, try to use at least one simile and be sure to experiment with line breaks for effect!

Art:

Create a collage based on the novel. What images would best represent Joylin's story? You can use pictures from magazines, the internet, or you can create your own. Describe why you chose these pictures in a brief artist's statement on the back.

Music:

Can you find a piece of music that would make a great soundtrack for one of the scenes in the book? Explain why you chose this piece (both lyrics and music) to play behind the movie version of the book!

Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, an award-winning author and literacy specialist, created this guide.