

Coretta Scott King Award 2002

Author Honor Acceptance Speech

Talkin' About Bessie

These awards have done wonders for my diet. Once I got over the shock of having won, and realized I'd be standing before you today, the first thing I thought was, "What will I wear?" That was followed closely by, "I have got to lose some weight!" And I did. Funny what a little motivation can do!

Okay! Now that I've got that out of my system, I can get serious.

Talkin' About Bessie is the story of a girl from the cotton fields of Texas who showed the world that a Black woman's place could very well be in the cockpit of a plane. I cannot imagine a more appealing story. Yet, it's one I almost missed telling.



In 1994, when Melanie Kroupa, then an editor at Orchard Books, broached the subject of my writing a picture-book biography, I scoffed. I felt the McKissacks pretty much had that genre sewn up, as far as African-American authors were concerned. But I agreed to peruse the history books for a personality who might catch my attention.

Enter Bessie Coleman.

After my introduction to the early days of flight, the exhilarating world of barnstorming, and Bessie's brave excursion into it, I grabbed my literary spade and started digging into her life. What I found was a woman of complexity, strength, passion, and imagination. I felt driven to tell her story, warts and all. Why warts and all? Because young readers need to know that the successful pursuit of a dream doesn't depend on moral perfection – which none of us can fully achieve. What is required is diligence, hard work, and unwavering faith – traits which Bessie personified.

Completed in 1994, *Talkin' About Bessie* had an unusually long gestation. Suffice it to say, the road to publication was plagued by a good many things. But Will Shakespeare had it right: All's well that ends well.

My thanks go to Orchard and Scholastic for giving me such a handsome book; to Susan Cohen of Writers House; to Melanie Kroupa, my first partner in crime on this project; to Amy Griffin and Ellen Dreyer, who saw this baby through its second trimester; and to

my editor Ken Geist, whose enthusiasm gave me hope that my long awaited literary offspring would be well received.

Special heartfelt thanks to my friend E.B. Lewis, who could not possibly have served this book better.

Finally, I thank the CSK Committee for so warmly and gloriously welcoming *Talkin' About Bessie* into the world.

Author Award Acceptance Speech

Bronx Masquerade

This morning, I feel a little bit like Halle Berry receiving the Oscar. It took me so long to get here, I just want to take my time! But I have promised to be brief, and so I will.

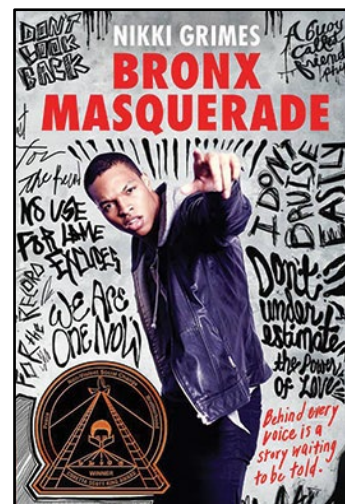
In Matthew 17, verse 20, it says, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

Sometimes my faith in the possibility of this day was no bigger than a mustard seed. But, thank God, that's all that was required!

Having the opportunity to address this august body twice in the same year, on the same day, is an honor even a prolific poet such as myself is hard-pressed to put into words.

Earlier, I shared a little of the story behind *Talkin' About Bessie*. Now, it is my joy to share a bit of my journey in writing *Bronx Masquerade*.

Several years ago, I got the idea to write a collection of monologues and poems about a classroom of high school students, over the course of a year. I sketched thirty-three possible characters and the issues each would contend with. When I was done, I shoved the sketches into a file folder and put them away. I was clear on the idea for the novel, but I realized I didn't yet possess the skills for its execution. And so, I waited and, in the interim, I wrote several new poetry collections and, eventually, slogged my way through the novel, *Jazmin's Notebook*.



Working on *Jazmin* afforded me a valuable opportunity to forge a solid working relationship with Editor Toby Sherry. We fought occasionally, but I learned to respect her deft analytical skills, and to appreciate her creative input. Both would prove critical in the development of *Bronx Masquerade*, the most challenging work I had ever attempted. It felt like a high-wire act, and Toby was my net!

Something of equal importance happened between concept and creation. I visited a high school in California where dear friend and gifted teacher, Drew Ward, inspired his students to share their poetry with one another in what became a regular series of open-mike readings. Word of these readings spread throughout the school, and soon students in other classes were scoring passes to visit Mr. Ward's room, to watch and participate in the goings-on. I was fortunate enough to witness this phenomenon up close. Like most experiences in my life, I filed this one away for later use.

Another year and a half passed before I sat down to write *Bronx Masquerade*. Then, after I'd written the poems and monologues that made up my first draft, I remembered that school and the poetry movement that was in full-swing there, and realized it was the perfect skeleton upon which to hang my poems and monologues. And with that memory, the marriage of fact and fiction was complete.

As I tour the country speaking to teachers and librarians, I love to talk about the power of poetry. *Bronx Masquerade* allowed me to display that power – the power poetry has to shape lives, to create community, and to underscore the vital truth that the most important common denominator in our universe is the human heart.

I hope readers come away from this book inspired to explore the world of poetry, and poetry performance, on their own. For my part, I'll continue striving to craft books that meet young readers where they are, books that encourage them to write their own tomorrows, books that are worthy of the award I'm honored to accept today.

I want to thank Dial Books and Penguin Putnam for supporting this book with such enthusiasm; Cecile Goyette for flap copy to die for; Elizabeth Harding of Curtis Brown, my personal cheerleader. You are not only my agent, but my friend. Thanks to my arts group, Montage, who gave me valuable feedback while the manuscript was in progress, and to Bryan Green, the savvy and articulate teen who read the manuscript at an early stage. Thanks to my sister, Carol, who believed more than I did that I would stand here someday.

Finally, I thank the CSK committee for this embarrassment of riches. And I thank God for his faithfulness.