

You've Gotta Have Heart!

For a Valentine's Day salute, share the heartfelt poetry of Nikki Grimes

by Michael Strickland

"Poetry is a literature of brush strokes," says poet Nikki Grimes. "It's the art of saying a lot with a little." That's what motivates her to keep at her craft. "I love the challenge of painting a picture or telling a story with only so many words," she says.

Grimes's poetic palette is especially powerful when it comes to composing verse about love for family and friends. "When I write about people who have touched my life," she reports, "I feel inspired." One such source of poetic license is Miss Lee, her junior-high math teacher.

"She was a proud and articulate African-American woman," Grimes recalls, "who had ramrod posture and a crown of white hair." Although Grimes was an avid reader who did well in school, she struggled in math. "But Miss Lee was able to convince me that I could succeed at whatever I put my mind to—even math," she says.

Grimes also remembers that this special teacher would bend the rules to encourage kids' creativity. For example, she fondly recalls the time Miss Lee decided against erasing the Valentine's Day hearts Grimes drew on the blackboard that was reserved for math problems.

This heartwarming memory is captured in the poem "Miss Lee" from *Hopscotch Love: A Family*

Michael Strickland, author and editor of several books of poetry for children, frequently visits schools to get students and teachers enthused about poetry.

Treasury of Love Poems (Lothrop), a new collection by Grimes due out in February. The poem provides a perfect springboard for celebrating Valentine's Day or continuing your study of African-American authors for Black History Month. Here's what you can do:

- Post the heartfelt poem on page 38 in your classroom
- Discuss the poet's background (see All About the Poet, below)
- Share Grimes's Tips for Young Poets and her hearty activities on page 39
- Read more poetry by Grimes (see Hot Off the Press! on page 39)

All about the poet

Grimes was born in Harlem in 1950 and started writing poetry at age six. "I liked the idea of playing with words," she says, "because I could hear music in them." She credits her father, a musician, with helping her appreciate the singsong qualities in language. "To this day," Grimes says, "I cannot think about poetry without thinking about music."

The poet also relates that growing up in Harlem had an impact on her writing. "The first poetry reading I went to was at the Countee Cullen Library on 135th Street," she says, "where I heard works by poets of the Harlem Renaissance." Her favorites from that era are Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Claude McKay. "I'm very influenced by their legacy," she says.



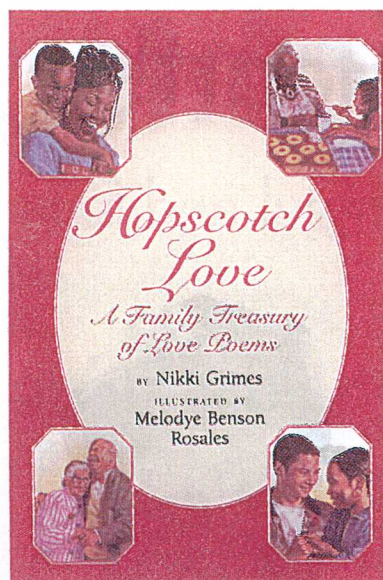
Nikki Grimes

"because reading their poetry helped give me a sense of confidence in my own voice."

Grimes decided to write *Hopscotch Love*, a collection of poems about love for family and friends, because aside from Eloise Greenfield's *Honey, I Love*, she knew of no other collection of children's poetry devoted to that subject which featured African Americans. "I saw a void and wanted to fill it," says the award-winning poet who has authored more than a dozen books for children. "I hope readers walk away from my collection with a greater appreciation of all the different types of love in their lives."

Writing poetry on the subject of family is a two-way street for Grimes, who now resides in Seattle, Washington. In addition to writing *about* close family and friends, she also writes *for* them. "I compose poems for weddings and birthdays and as thinking-of-

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you notes," she says. In just a few brush strokes, Grimes creates gifts from the heart.

ACTIVITIES from the POET

Act out!

GRADES K-3 Invite groups of students to act out "Miss Lee" as a drama. This activity will help them focus on the words and listen carefully. First, have children read the poem (or read it aloud to them) and think about all the roles they could play (e.g., the narrator, the teacher, the other students in the class, a principal in the doorway). Have them decide how to move (e.g., body language), what facial expressions to show, and what sound effects to add (e.g., gasps or sighs of relief). Then have one child read the poem as the others act it out, or have students recite it in a round-robin. Invite groups to perform the poem and take a bow.

Surprise!

GRADES K-6 In "Miss Lee," Grimes captures the drama of the moment when her teacher surprises her by not erasing the hearts she drew. Ask stu-

dents to think of something surprising that happened to them at school and recount that memory in a poem. Once they've written their poems (or dictated them to you), have children team up to dramatize their works for the class. Afterward, post their poetry together with the poem "Miss Lee" on a bulletin board entitled "School is full of surprises!"

Extension activity. To add to the fun, compose a poem about something surprising that happened when *you* were in school or during class this year. Enlist students to act it out. (Hint: You may even invite a child to play your part as the teacher while you act out a student role.)

Valentine's Day is...

GRADES 3-6 Have students brainstorm Valentine's Day memories, terms of endearment, and phrases for Valentine's cards. Grimes remembers saving every valentine she ever got from her grandmother, trading red-hot candied hearts with messages stamped on them, and sometimes not receiving any valentines at school. Then, as Grimes suggests in *Getting Started* (see *Tips for Young Poets*, right), have children use their list to choose a subject, develop a scenario or story around it, and write out simple prose. Next, have kids shape their prose into poetry. For inspiration for poetic rhythms, Grimes suggests they listen to music or think of songs they know. Once students have completed their poems, bind them into a class book that kids give to loved ones as Valentine's Day gifts.

Hot off the press!

Check out these new poetry books by Grimes:

Is It Far to Zanzibar? (Lothrop, 1999)

My Man Blue (Dial, 1999)

A Dime a Dozen (Dial, 1998) ■

Grimes's Tips for Young Poets

Getting started. "Before I write a single word, I immerse myself in the works of my favorite poets, including Lucille Clifton, Gary Soto, Langston Hughes, Yeats, and Mari Evans. This helps put me in the right mind-set for writing.

"Once I do that, I don't have a single process for writing, because what I do depends on the particular poem. Often, because most of my poetry is narrative, I begin with a subject, develop a scenario or story around it, and write out simple prose. Only then do I think about imagery and shape metaphors."

Choosing a subject. "Much of my poetry is drawn from real life. Whenever I talk to students, I remind them that they also have their own stories to tell through poetry."

Adding rhythm. "There's poetic rhythm all around us. It's part of our lives. It's in song lyrics, jump-rope rhymes, games children play with their hands, and so on. To start thinking about how my poem is going to flow, I call to mind rhythms I like."

Using rhymes. "If I decide to make a poem rhyme, I remind myself not to get so caught up in the verse that I forget what the poem is about. I wrote 'A Tip in Writing Poetry' below to explain what I mean."

The first mistake
most people make
is playing with
meter and rhyme
before they
have taken the time
to decide or figure out
what the poem is about.