

NIKKI GRIMES

BRONX masquerade

Winner of the Coretta Scott King Award



Wesley “Bad Boy” Boone

I ain't particular about doing homework, you understand. My teachers practically faint whenever I turn something in. Matter of fact, I probably got the longest list of excuses for missing homework of anyone alive. Except for my homey Tyrone. He tries to act like he's not even interested in school, like there's no point in studying hard, or dreaming about tomorrow, or bothering to graduate. He's got his reasons. I keep on him about going to school, though, saying I need the company. Besides, I tell him, if he drops out and gets a J.O.B., he won't have any time to work on his songs. That always gets to him. Tyrone might convince everybody else that he's all through with dreaming, but I know he wants to be a big hip-hop star. He's just afraid he won't live long enough to do it. Me, I hardly ever think about checking out. I'm more worried about figuring what I want to do if I live.

Anyway, I haven't had to drag Tyrone off to school lately, or make excuses for not having my

homework done, because I've been doing it. It's the Harlem Renaissance stuff that's got us both going.

We spent a month reading poetry from the Harlem Renaissance in our English class. Then Mr. Ward—that's our teacher—asked us to write an essay about it. Make sense to you? Me neither. I mean, what's the point of studying *poetry* and then writing *essays*? So I wrote a bunch of poems instead. They weren't too shabby, considering I'd only done a few rap pieces before. My favorite was about Langston Hughes. How was I to know Teach would ask me to read it out loud? But I did. Knees knocking like a skeleton on Halloween, embarrassment bleaching my black cheeks red, eyes stapled to the page in front of me. But I did it, I read my poem.

Guess what. Nobody laughed. In fact, everybody thought it was cool. By the time I got back to my seat, other kids were shouting out: "Mr. Ward, I got a poem too. Can I bring it in to read?"

Teach cocked his head to the side, like he was hearing something nobody else did.

"How many people here have poems they'd like to read?" he asked. Three hands shot up. Mr. Ward rubbed his chin for a minute. "Okay," he said. "Bring them with you tomorrow."

After class Teach came over to my desk. "Great poem," said Mr. Ward. "But I still expect to see an essay from you. I'll give you another week." So much for creative expression.

Long Live Langston

BY WESLEY BOONE

*Trumpeter of Lenox and 7th
through Jesse B. Semple,
you simply celebrated
Blues and Be-bop
and being Black before
it was considered hip.
You dipped into
the muddy waters
of the Harlem River
and shouted "taste and see"
that we Black folk be good
at fanning hope
and stoking the fires
of dreams deferred.
You made sure
the world heard
about the beauty of
maple sugar children, and the
artfully tattooed backs of Black
sailors venturing out
to foreign places.*

something's

going on

Something more than a high school poetry assignment. Kids are taking a look, leaning in close, asking why or how. Wesley Boone, writing a poem for Mr. Ward's class and actually wanting to read it aloud, poetry slam style. Lupe Algarin, desperate to have a baby so she will feel loved. Raynard Patterson, hiding a secret behind his silence. Porscha Johnson, looking for an outlet for her anger after her mother ODs. One by one, eighteen voices speak up, show themselves to the world, and deal with the consequences. Through the poetry they share and the stories they tell, their words and lives show what lies beneath the skin, behind the eyes, beyond the masquerade.

"As always, Grimes gives young people exactly what they're looking for—real characters who show them they are not alone." —*SLJ*

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