

Talking about Reading and Writing at RPL with Award-Winning Children's Author Nikki Grimes

The Children's Center at Central Library and RPL's Sully Branch location were abuzz on November 9 and 10, 2016, as nearly a total of six hundred elementary students from the Rochester City Schools poured into the two sites to meet noted children's author Nikki Grimes. The Friends & Foundation of the Rochester Public Library covered the fee for these author visits. Children's Services Consultant Tonia Burton began working with Ms. Grimes about a possible visit to the RCSD at the 2015 Rochester Children's Book Festival and coordinated these six presentations.

"Thank you so much for the opportunity the Friends & Foundation provided to read and visit with the author Nikki Grimes," said Dana Williams, RCSD classroom teacher. "Students and teachers from The Children's School #15 were so inspired by the visit. Students have explored the different writings of Ms. Grimes by reading her poetry at our morning meetings and finding other works in our school library. The students who met Ms. Grimes have continued a small book club during their lunchtime and invited new friends to join! We are currently reading the novel, *One Crazy Summer*, a book with similar themes and strong female characters."



L to R: Jasmire Brown; Danjea Harris; Sadie Rolle-Knox; Ms. Grimes; Amina Abukar; Mchiwa Hassan; Ruweida Abdulrahman; and Afaf Hadi (RCSD School #15)

Students throughout the District had read and discussed Grimes' *The Road to Paris* with their classmates and students prior to her visit and were primed with questions about the book and her writing process when she came. Among other things, students wanted to know

Why did you write about foster children?
Do you speak a second language?
What inspires you to write? What inspired *The Road to Paris*?
Were you popular in school?
How did it feel to lose the only person close to you? (Your sister in real life and Paris losing Malcolm in the book)
Do you write by hand or do you use a computer?

Did you think about having Paris make a different decision at the end of the book?
Are all your books realistic fiction?
What is your favorite book from when you were a child?
When you wrote your first poem at age 13, what was it about?
Where did the title come from?
Did anyone help you write this book?

Ms. Grimes answered these questions and more as she talked about her writing process, from starting with a yellow pad and pen, editing, then typing a manuscript for submission to a publisher, more editing, and finally publication! She writes using what she knows and uses her experiences to tell her story, through fiction or poetry. She shared The Golden Shovel technique for writing poetry; this is the method used in her most recent book, *One Last Word, Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance*. The book was released in January 2017, and has received glowing reviews for its fresh look at poets from that period by combining their work with her own original poetry.



Grimes, surrounded by books to autograph

Sully Children’s Librarian Maria Meeks-Heinlein commented, “Even though she was exhausted at the end of her three speeches, Ms. Grimes graciously agreed to have pictures taken with some of the classes, and staff, before she left.” Although a book signing had not been planned, Ms. Grimes also agreed to sign each student’s copy of *The Road to Paris*, after the day’s presentations were finished. Ms. Burton, from Central Library, coordinated returning the books to the schools for distribution to the children.

“Our students were so excited to receive a copy of her book *The Road to Paris* and have it autographed. For many of them, this was the first time they have met a real live author!” commented Dr. Colleen Sadowski, Director of School Library System & Media Services, Rochester City School District.

They met not just any real author—in January 2017 Nikki Grimes was announced as winner of the ALSC/American Library Association 2017 *Laura Ingalls Wilder Award* for her “substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children,” the latest honor in a long career that spans poetry, chapter books, picture books and novels. While here, Grimes noted, “When I was 13 years old, I gave my first public poetry reading at the Countee Cullen Library in Harlem, New York. It was a perfect venue for me to officially kick off my life as a writer.”

Two of the Rochester Public Libraries were the perfect venue for her to meet some of Rochester’s young students and encourage them to find their own voices. Who knows? One of those students might someday grow up to be an author, connecting with young people through their carefully chosen words!

