



# Between the Lines

*Nikki Grimes*

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## Between the Lines Nikki Grimes

Darrian dreams of writing for the *New York Times*. To hone his skills and learn more about the power of words, he enrolls in Mr. Ward's class, known for its open-mic poetry readings and boys vs. girls poetry slam. Everyone in class has something important to say, and in sharing their poetry, they learn that they all face challenges and have a story to tell--whether it's about health problems, aging out of foster care, being bullied for religious beliefs, or having to take on too much responsibility because of an addicted parent. As Darrian and his classmates get to know one another through poetry, they bond over the shared experiences and truth that emerge from their writing, despite their private struggles and outward differences.

## Between the Lines Details

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Author : Nikki Grimes

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# From Reader Review Between the Lines for online ebook

## Lulu (the library leopard) says

Was this a perfect novel? No. There was a lot of summary and the combination of very short chapters + tons of POVs sometimes confused me.

However, I loved reading about these characters finding their self-worth and voices through poetry. This book also tackles a lot of important issues like the foster care system, immigration, and the way the War on Drugs unfairly affects people of color in a way that felt naturally worked into the character's lives. The character's voices also felt more distinguishable than the first book, which I appreciated. I also think this book had some better emotional payoff at the final poetry slam than the first one did—there's several plot lines that all converge and pay off, rather than the novel just ending. (I would have liked to see more of the actual poetry slam, though.) Overall, I would recommend!

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## Carol Baldwin says

Nikki Grimes' sequel to *Bronx Masquerade*, *BETWEEN THE LINES* (Penguin Random House, 2018), combines narrative and free verse in a moving book about teens whose lives are changed through poetry. The audio book published by Recorded Books is narrated by different actors; each eloquently expresses a different character. Listen or read this book and you'll reach the same conclusion that I did: Grimes masterfully created authentic voices and personalities for the six different point of view characters.

## REVIEW

For various reasons ranging from a desire to write poetry to attendance only because of a guidance counselor's suggestion--the students in Mr. Ward's poetry class are thrown together. The universal theme of wanting to belong weaves the students and their poems together. This commonality provides the reader a window into the the personal and interpersonal struggles and triumphs they face.

The reader first hears about Darian, a Puerto Rican teen who sees himself as a newspaper man, not a poet. He lost his mother to breast cancer and by the end of the book his poetry gives him a way to express his grief.

## Private Pain

Numb, I sit on the edge  
of the bed  
Mami y Papi share.  
Shared.  
I feel light as the ghost  
my mother has become.  
Her picture

on the bedside table  
looks blurry until  
I wipe my eyes.  
"Pobrecito," she would say.  
If she were here,  
if she were anywhere  
in this world.  
"Mijo," she would whisper  
and touch my cheek,  
and I would answer,  
"Mami."  
But this time,  
The word never leaves  
my throat.  
And what difference  
does that make?  
When I wasn't looking  
Mama's heart stopped  
like a broken clock.  
Half past 36,  
the final tick,  
the final tock.  
Explain to me  
exactly how  
I'm supposed to  
tell time now. (pp. 130-1)

\*\*\*\*\*

Li Cheng is "all Chinese and all American." Her poetry is full of "contradictions which squeeze into one small body."

#### Threads

How can I explain  
the duality of Li?  
The muffled sounds  
of mah-jong tiles touching,  
clicking together,  
flips a switch in me  
as my parents follow  
the ritual  
of the ancient game.  
The Mandarin calligraphy  
clinging to our walls  
sends my soul sailing  
to rice paddies  
oceans away,  
to the land of silk,

red sunrises,  
and the jade mountain peaks  
my parents  
often speak of.  
China whispers  
through their blood,  
You are part mine.  
Remember!  
And I nod, silent  
and ashamed  
that my untrained  
American lips  
are unfamiliar  
with my ancestors'  
local lingo. (pp. 26-7)

\*\*\*\*\*

Jenesis has been placed in thirteen foster homes and is worried about aging out of the system and having nowhere to live. Here is some of her story.

### Blue Eyes Squared

I see you staring at me.  
You be boring a hole in my soul  
as if the alchemy  
of your curiosity  
could somehow turn  
these blue eyes brown,  
but you might as well forget it.  
You frown at my blond curls,  
even though girls with hair  
the color of sun  
the color of spun gold  
are supposed to have more fun.  
At least, that's the story  
they try to sell on TV.  
Yeah, I'm different, but  
don't call me freak  
or assume I'm the only one.  
There are bound to be  
other brown beauties  
with pale blue eyes  
eerily like mine,  
wearing smiles crooked  
in exactly the same way,  
noses that scream  
matched set.

Are there more like me?  
Yeah, you bet.  
When I find them,  
I'll fit in without question,  
never mind that  
the world thinks  
I'm odd as H-E-  
well, you get it. (pp. 33-34)

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Val feels the pain of the prejudice her father faces as an Argentinian immigrant.

### What You Don't Know

Mi padre, Ignacio,  
is a book you haven't read.  
It's filled with poetry  
that can curl its fingers  
around your corazón  
and squeeze out joy.  
Pero you've never  
cracked the cover.  
You scribble crítica  
that questions  
the measure of the man,  
but you've never  
peeled back the pages  
of his biografía.  
You toss el libro  
onto the trash heap  
marked "Immigrant"  
y ustedes dicen it has no value.  
But, of course,  
you are categorically incorrect,  
which you would know  
if only you could read  
las palabras.  
If only you, too,  
were blessed  
to be bilingual. (p. 51)

\*\*\*\*\*

Marcel has been labeled a troublemaker. His past includes his father's unjust imprisonment and how that demoralized him and shattered their family.

Troubled (partial)

What is it  
with people and their labels,  
as if the way they mark me  
makes them able  
to understand who I am  
or why?  
"Troubled kid"  
tells you exactly nothing  
about the trouble  
my pops has seen  
or Moms  
or me.  
We stare from windows  
caged in iron,  
in state prisons  
or rented rooms,  
which are only better  
by degree.  
We are forced  
to survive outside  
the neatly mowed landscapes  
of your imagination.  
Our stop on the train station  
is worlds away  
from your manicured lawns  
and lives  
and the lies you tell  
about the days  
of racial discrimination  
being in the past.  
Quit asking  
why I'm angry  
or I'll tell you. (pp. 39-40)

\*\*\*\*\*

Freddie takes care of her eight-year-old niece and her alcoholic mother. This is a portion of one of her poems.

#### School Rules

Stage right,  
the lights fade on a daily life  
of tiptoeing around  
my niece's feelings about the mom  
who traded time with her  
for time spent cozing up to crank.  
The truth is too rank  
for her tender little-girl ears.

And so, until she's fast asleep,  
I keep bitter thoughts  
under my tongue's lock and key.  
Have I mentioned how it hurts me?  
That neither my niece nor I  
manage to have a mother  
worthy of the name?  
Oh, mine is present,  
in an alcoholic-fog kind of way,  
which is to say, hardly at all. (p. 148)

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Nikki Grimes stitches a story together so real and touching that after the boys vs. girls poetry slam which produces outstanding poetry on both sides--I want to know what happens to each character. This would be a great curriculum resource for teens: some readers will resonate and identify, others will be informed by stories much different than their own. Read it out loud in reader's theater. Let it inspire you and your student to write poetry. The results may surprise you.

#### Giveaway

I am giving away my audio book, courtesy Recorded Books. Leave me a comment with your email address if you are new to my blog. Random.org will pick a winner on August 3, 2018.  
[www.carolbaldwanblog.blogspot.com](http://www.carolbaldwanblog.blogspot.com)

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### **Ms. Yingling says**

E ARC from Edelweiss Plus

Darrian really wants to be a news reporter, and a teacher suggests that if he really wants to learn to write, he should investigate poetry. He signs up for a poetry class in high school where all of the students are working toward doing a poetry slam. They all have different issues (negligent parents, parents out of work, foster care, etc.) but use poetry to help understand their world and the other students. The chapters alternate between characters, and the poems written by the students for assignments are included.

**Strengths:** I liked that this is set in a high school, but there isn't any inappropriate language or situations. There is some tentative romance, lots of problems with home life, and a lot of interest in writing. The cover is really nice.

**Weaknesses:** I wish the poems had all been in different, distinctive voices the way that Frost did in Keesha's House. All the poems sounded the same to me.

**What I really think:** This just didn't do much for me. This is most likely because I tried to write poetry in high school and college, and while I had some success, writing poetry or going in to journalism is a cruel

thing to encourage a student to do for a career.

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## **Donalyn says**

Fabulous stand-alone companion to Bronx Masquerade.

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## **Laura Gardner says**

????????/5 for Between the Lines & Bronx Masquerade by Nikki Grimes.

Between the Lines is a companion novel to the Coretta Scott King award winning Bronx Masquerade, a book about a group of students who find the power of poetry together in their English class. Now Mr. Ward has a new group of students in his English class in Between the Lines and yet again they're finding that poetry has the ability to bring diverse groups together.

First things first, those covers! I love the new look; I have the original cover of Bronx Masquerade in my library and the student on the cover looks a bit young. I love the juxtaposition of the words with the young teens on the updated covers; Bronx Masquerade looks like it has graffiti on it and Between the Lines is covered with newspaper headlines. I can't wait to see these in hardcover!

Bronx Masquerade was published 16 years ago, but in rereading it this week it still felt as relevant and raw as the first time I read it.

Between the Lines is no less powerful.

In its pages we meet Darrian, an aspiring reporter who is convinced that learning to write poetry will hone his writing skills. Darrian narrates through Between the Lines, sharing his headline for each of his peers. We also meet Li, a Chinese American student who wants to prove she is more than just academics. We also meet Jeneisis, who has lived in thirteen different foster homes and has walls built up to protect her heart; Freddie, a young girl who cares for her drug-addicted sister's young child, as well as her alcoholic mother; Marcel, who carries his anger like a shield, among others. Each student opens up through their verse and begins to connect with their peers, ultimately coming together to do a girls vs. boys poetry slam at the conclusion of the book. These types of books may be difficult for some readers who either struggle to keep the different students straight or wish there was more of a plot. Nevertheless, characters in both books are growing and changing, connecting with each other and their poetry is deeply affecting in many cases. Issues addressed include race, police brutality, immigration, foster care and other important issues in sensitive ways

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## **Becky says**

First sentence: I check out Mr. Ward's classroom early, find dark walls covered with poetry hanging in picture frames bright as jelly beans. Who wrote all these poems? And where exactly does Open Mike Friday take place?

Premise/plot: Nikki Grimes' Between the Lines is a companion novel to the award-winning Bronx Masquerade. It is a new school year and this is a new class. So it isn't exactly a sequel. But if you enjoyed the first one, you'll love the second as well.

This YA novel written in prose and verse celebrates the human spirit. Readers meet a handful of students--

young men, young women from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Wild Words by Li Cheng

Words

crack me open.

Only the right ones, of course,

those laced with beauty

or infused with the sweetness

of a ripe peach.

Each word, each lyrical phrase,

often powerful enough

to break, or heal,

the heart.

But you knew this

from the start.

Why else would you

come offering to share

your own wild words

with plain, ordinary me?

Words are clearly

the truest thing

we have in common.

Still, why me?

Never mind.

Your clever lines

have lassoed

my attention.

I'm listening.

My thoughts: Bronx Masquerade and Between the Lines remind me of Glee. In a good way. Both are about high school students finding a safe haven to be themselves and find their voices. Both are about high school students coming together and forming strong bonds of friendship. There are some differences. There is less drama--no melodrama--in these novels. That's a relief. The characters have struggles--internal and external--to deal with on a daily basis. Poetry is how they express themselves and deal with all the pressures and uncertainties of life. Honesty is important, and these poems offer it with amazing vulnerability. The students are brave, in a way, but their trust is not misplaced.

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## **Kate Olson says**

@kidlitexchange #partner ~ I loved Bronx Masquerade and I loved this one EVEN MORE! Although it can stand alone, I definitely think that these titles are best read in sequence so that readers can see Tyrone's evolution and how the popularity of the slam poetry class grows. The characters in BETWEEN THE LINES address topics of family, race, immigration, racial profiling, foster care and many other hard-hitting topics in heartbreaking and insightful ways.

Told through accessible prose and exceptional verse, this title is a required purchase for high schools ~ there

are drug references and some cursing, so individual librarians and teachers will need to make the call on whether this is a good fit for their middle school. I will be including it in my combined middle/high library and will have no issues with middle school students reading it.

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## **Diayll says**

**Originally Reviewed At:** Mother/Gamer/Writer

**Rating:** 4.5 out of 5 Controllers

**Review Source:** ARC from Publisher/Blog Tour

**Reviewer:** Me

This is my first novel by Nikki Grimes and I have to admit, anytime I read a book from a new author I'm concerned I either won't enjoy it or I won't be able to relate to it on a personal level. However, with its easygoing prose and relevant, deeply compelling storytelling, *Between the Lines* not only made me feel an array of emotions, it left me with a newfound love of myself.

The story is told through multiple perspectives, high school students each with their own goals and aspirations who are battling emotional wounds because of their personal situations at home. Our main perspective comes from Darrian, a Puerto Rican student who lives with his father and dreams of writing for *The New York Times*. His goal is to tell a true narrative about people who seemingly get misrepresented in media, namely people from diverse backgrounds who are not the white majority. Through his eyes we get a glimpse of the other students in his class, how they view themselves versus how he views them. This was an interesting dynamic between the characters. Most of the time, people have a different perception of themselves despite what people on the outside may see.

Darrian was an inquisitive young man who wanted to know and learn about the people around him and why they saw themselves a certain way. Interestingly enough, a lot of what the characters were dealing with are issues our youth deal with today: single parent family, parent's goals for you versus your own, foster care system, parents in jail, just being a brown person at the wrong place at the wrong time. And how does one live with that? How does a person, despite the odds being stacked against them, persevere their dreams and become something better, something greater? I think this is the most profound question the novel asks and it is one worth asking again and again. Not everyone is given the same opportunities to succeed and until that disparity is challenged, we have to guide our youth to make the right decisions and help them discover who they are in this mixed-up world.

Overall, I absolutely adore this novel. The rich poetry leaves the reader with an appreciation for the beauty of language and culture while managing to convey the hardships of life no matter a person's ethnicity or background. There is something in here for everyone that I believe any young person (even some adults) can benefit from. Whether you're looking for a novel to inspire your children or to give insight on cultural inequalities, or for just plain fun, please give *Between the Lines* a try. You won't be disappointed.

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## Lesley says

I would give this novel 6 stars if I could (I apologize for the long review).

My very first year of teaching, a student's father called me and accused me of wasting his son's time with poetry. I listened, aghast, but did not know quite what to say. I wish I had had Nikki Grimes' novel, *Between the Lines*, to quote Mr. Winston, the librarian as he explains to Darrian why he should learn about all sorts of writing, even poetry. "Because poetry, more than anything else, will teach you about the power of words." And Grimes in her newest novel, to be released in February 2018, shows us the power of words—to heal, to strengthen, to discover. Like *Bronx Masquerade*, this novel takes place in Mr. Ward's English classroom where he holds Open Mike Fridays and students work towards a Poetry Slam (and where BM character Tyrone makes guest appearances).

Mr Ward's eleventh grade class is a microcosm of the outside world—Black, Brown, and White and maybe in-between. The reader views the eight students through the lens of Darrian, a Puerto Rican student who lives with his father and has dreams of writing for *The New York Times* because, "Let's face it, some of those papers have a bad habit of getting Black and Brown stories wrong....But I figure the only way to get our stories straight is by writing them ourselves." So Darrian joins Mr. Ward's class to learn about words. He does learn the power of words, but he also learns about his classmates as they learn about each other and about themselves through their narratives, their free writes, and the poetry they share. There is Marcel, whose dad was in jail just long enough to ruin his life; Jenesis, a foster child in her 13th placement; Freddie who takes care of her niece and her own alcoholic mom; Val whose immigrant father was a professor in his native land and now works as a janitor; Li, whose Chinese parents want a strong, smart American girl; Kyle whose defective heart makes him fearless and a mentor to Angela who is afraid she is not enough, and Darrian whose mother died of cancer "half past 36."

But these students, as the students in our classrooms, are more than their labels. As Tyrone explains about his class the year before, "Before Open Mic, we were in our own separate little groups, thinking we were so different from each other. But when people started sharing who they were through their poetry, turned out we were more alike than we were different." And Darrian finds out that each word can be unique and special, as Li says about poetry, but also a newspaper story "can be beautiful, especially if it's true." Truth is what these characters and novel reveals.

A strength of the novel is the unique voice of each character; Nikki Grimes had to write not only their stories but the unique poetry of each character. And the reader sees the growth of the characters through their interactions and poetry as they discover each other and come together, the boys discovering "Hope," and the girls telling what "We Are."

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## Ka'leneReads says

GoodRead

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## Linda says

This is a 'next book' after Nikki Grimes' Coretta Scott King Award-winning *Bronx Masquerade*. It's a perfect

book to read this April/poetry month, shows how important it could be for teachers to use poetry with students, helping them to express their feelings, "their" stories so they can find empathy with each other, so they can be "known" to others. Slam poetry is an inspiring way to help students learn the power of poetry. Nikki Grimes shows this so beautifully in her new book.

Darrian begins this tale with dreams of writing for the New York Times. He is curious when he hears a hint about writing, thus enrolls in Mr. Ward's class, known for its open-mic poetry readings and boys vs. girls poetry slam. Grimes allows all the students in the class to talk, tell their stories, and then in poetry. The challenges they face are daunting, makes me wonder how much teachers and classmates know about that boy across the room, the girl who sits in front or in back of them in chemistry. It can be health problems, aging out of foster care, being bullied for religious beliefs, or having to take on too much responsibility because of an addicted parent. It touched me deeply when Darrian and his classmates began to learn about each other, become closer and closer, and realize that they have gained support, can count on it. It means so very much to have someone there for you.

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### **Carla says**

Always love reading anything by Nikki Grimes. Meeting these kids and hearing their stories, especially Jenesis, will really touch you.

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### **Cathy says**

In the development of readers, there is a term called "transitional readers." Students who will become lifelong readers or "fluent readers," hit this stage at different times in their life from upper elementary to middle school. Think back to the time when you were into series because the characters became friends of yours. Think back to those authors that you trusted because their voice was comfortable, and their style engaged you. That is the transitional stage and YA books cater to that stage which is why there are so many trilogies.

Ms. Grimes is a voice I trust for transitional readers. If readers like Jacqueline Woodson's *Locomotive* but want an older high school character, Grimes is a great portal to a PG version of the urban (NY), minority (mostly African American, Puerto Rican, Hispanic) experience.

Like Grimes' *Bronx Masquerade*, this story highlights multiple characters, all with their own obstacles and strengths. What holds them all together is a poetry class in school and an upcoming poetry slam competition.

Through their backstory told in prose and their resulting poem, Ms. Grimes is perfect for the reluctant male readers. As a teacher, she also seems to model her own writing process (free write/share/poem) or at least offers up some specific ideas of how to run a writing workshop in the classroom.

Between the Lines is Grimes doing what she does best. She allows her characters to tell their own stories in their own way and opens up the neighborhood a little to let hope radiate outwards.

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**Laura (bbliophile) says**

This was a wonderful and very powerful read.

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**Lauren says**

3.5-4 stars. I loved the style of having a main narrator while also getting different POVs and poems from the other characters and learning about their diverse backgrounds and home situations. The headlines scattered throughout were a great touch, with one of my favorites being GIRL ATLAS BALANCES THE WORLD because it's so dang relatable.

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