

## Kwame Alexander

**Date of Birth:** August 21, 1968

**Occupation:** Writer

In 2015, Kwame Alexander, already the author of more than twenty books, won both the Coretta Scott King Author Honor Award and the John Newbery Medal for *The Crossover* (2014), his young-adult novel in verse about boys and basketball. In his Newbery acceptance speech, reprinted in *Horn Book Magazine* (July–Aug. 2015), Alexander expressed his sense of awe at earning such recognition and explained how he got there: “I think poetry found me. I think it circled above, for years, until I was ready, and then it swooped down, grabbed me by the arms, lifted me up, and I’ve been soaring ever since.”

Winning both awards led Alexander to further critical acclaim and many guest appearances at libraries, schools, and conferences. In addition, his children’s book *Acoustic Rooster and His Backyard Band* (2011), which he initially sold at a local farmers’ market, was optioned for a children’s television show. Alexander’s other awards include the Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award, the Paterson Poetry Prize, and the Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for Children. He was also named the first Dorothy Carter Writer-in-Residence at the Bank Street College of Education Center for Children’s Literature.



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### EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Kwame Alexander was born on August 21, 1968, in New York City, and the family later moved to Chesapeake, Virginia. His mother was an elementary school teacher and administrator, and his father was an academic and publisher; both were authors as well. According to Alexander, his father considered him and his siblings as part of his publishing staff, helping with tasks like stuffing envelopes, causing Alexander to joke that he entered the publishing business at age six. His parents also wanted their children to be aware of social justice issues, and Alexander’s father took him at a young age on a march to protest police brutality.

As a child, Alexander liked exploring his home’s attic, filled with treasures. There he discovered jazz records that belonged to his father, sparking a lifelong

fascination with jazz as well as a deeper appreciation of his father. Alexander also fell in love with words from his mother reading to him. In his daycare days, as he recalled in his Newbery acceptance speech, a teacher told his mother, “Your son intimidates the other children with the things he says. He is a little arrogant.” At which point, his mother smiled and said, “Yes, he is. We teach him to use his words, thank you.”

Books were everywhere in the Alexander house; Eric Carle, Lee Bennett Hopkins, and Eloise Greenfield were among young Alexander’s favorite writers. However, his father later forced Alexander to read the encyclopedia and other books he had no interest in, which led to a dislike of reading. He turned his attention to playing basketball and football. It was only when he discovered the autobiography of boxer Muhammad Ali in middle school that he returned to reading for pleasure. He also developed an interest in poetry in high school in order to write love poems to girls.

Alexander attended Virginia Tech, planning to become a doctor until a course in organic chemistry caused him to rethink the idea. He was involved in student activism pushing for a black studies program on campus. During his sophomore year, he took a poetry class taught by Nikki Giovanni, whose words he had been reading since childhood. Her belief in his ability changed his direction, and Giovanni became his mentor. Writing love poetry to his college sweetheart (who later became his wife) further convinced him to pursue a career in poetry.

## **BLACKWORDS AND BOOK-IN-A-DAY**

Alexander founded BlackWords, Inc. in 1995 to promote the work of black authors, beginning with himself. His father—after telling him there was no money in poetry and to rethink his career—gave him a check for \$1,700 to start the imprint. With a thousand copies of his first poetry collection, consisting of love poems, he began a thirty-city book tour. As he told Tracie Currie for *Black Issues Book Review* (Mar.–Apr. 2000), “The idea is that when people think of quality black poetry and literature they will think of BlackWords.”

The company became both a bookseller and a publishing house, focusing on—but not limited to—poetry. BlackWords found success in sponsoring author tours, getting black writers opportunities to speak in bookstores, schools, and other venues. Alexander, along with poet Stacey Lyn Evans, began the first tour in 1995 in Los Angeles. The tour led to respectable book sales, and in the first five years of its existence, the Washington, DC–based press sold 10,000 books of poetry.

In 2006 Alexander founded Book-in-a-Day, a workshop program to promote student writing and publishing. It began when a teacher in Detroit asked for his help in getting the poetry of her advanced placement class published. Originally scheduled for two weeks, the session was cut to one day. When Alexander returned home, his wife suggested he use the experience as a model. The program’s day-long workshops are held in schools in the United States, the Caribbean, and Canada. Students select a title, create a design, write poems, and can even create

a plan for marketing and a book-signing party. As Alexander told Colleen Patrice Clark for *Literacy Today* (Mar.–Apr. 2016), “Through the power of language and literature, young people can learn to open up to a world of possibilities for themselves and say ‘yes’ to that possibility, whatever it is for them.”

In addition to Book-in-a-Day, Alexander cofounded Literacy Empowerment Action Project (LEAP) for Ghana with Tracy Chiles McGhee. After visiting the West African nation, in the fall of 2012 he led a group of five writers and educational professionals to that country to give away books and a library to hold them, as well as to train teachers. The group also planned to expand to other regions. The organization developed a Nikki Giovanni LEAP Scholarship Fund and offered a camp experience to 120 village children.

### THE CROSSOVER

Having published two successful picture books and ten books of poetry, including *Crush: Love Poems* (2007), Alexander wanted to try something new. Striving to create literature that would resonate with middle schoolers, who often lose interest in reading as he once did, he worked on the basketball-themed novel *The Crossover* for five years. He told Clark, “I realized I could use sports to get boys in particular and all middle graders engaged with language and literature. . . . It feels authentic.” He was inspired by sources ranging from jazz to great basketball players whose games have been considered poetry in motion.

The final work, which took the unusual form of a novel in poems, received twenty rejection letters before being accepted at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Yet

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it quickly proved popular with its target audience, and critics took note. *The Crossover* turned out to be Alexander’s major breakthrough, winning him universal accolades and the highly coveted Newbery Medal, among other honors. In his acceptance

speech for the Newbery Medal, Alexander described the book as “first and foremost, a novel about fathers and sons. About love. About family.”

As an African American author, Alexander acknowledged that *The Crossover* could be viewed in terms of race, especially in the context of widespread concern over discrimination by police in the 2010s. Discussing the book with Jeffrey Brown for *PBS NewsHour* (26 Mar. 2015), he said, “There’s a strong race element as it relates to the way they’re trying to raise their boys or when the father gets stopped by the police. And I never thought about that when I was writing it.” Still, Alexander suggested that his message is universal, and the unspecified race of his characters is unimportant, despite frequent questions from teachers and librarians. Writing for the *New York Times* (26 Aug. 2016), he noted that his young readers, regardless of their race, “believe I am writing about *them*. Why is

this so much harder for the grown-ups?” According to Alexander, good literature functions not only as a mirror but also as a window into other worlds.

### **BOOKED AND OTHER PROJECTS**

Following the success of his formula of writing about sports in verse, Alexander penned *Booked* (2016), the tale of Nick, a twelve-year-old soccer player whose academic father forces him to read the dictionary daily. He would note it as his most autobiographical work. Soccer player students whom Alexander met on a school visit had suggested the idea.

Although at the time he had heard the rumor that *The Crossover* was in the running for the Newbery Medal, Alexander decided to focus elsewhere, feeling that he had no chance of winning. He completed *Booked* and sent the finished manuscript to his editor the night before he received the phone call telling him he had won the Newbery. Following this success, Alexander’s publisher, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books for Young Readers, offered him a four-book deal. They announced plans for *Rebound*, a prequel focusing on the father in *The Crossover*, as well as a new trilogy aimed at middle schoolers. The historical-fiction trilogy would tell the story of a young boy from Ghana seeking freedom after being taken as a slave, covering subjects including the Middle Passage, the Underground Railroad, and the US Civil War.

Meanwhile, Alexander’s educational projects continue. Book-in-a-Day inspired *Kwame Alexander’s Page-to-Stage Writing Workshop* (2016), a published manual guiding similar self-publishing programs in any classroom.

### **ADVOCATING FOR LITERATURE**

With his own works, as well as the ongoing efforts of Book-in-a-Day and LEAP for Ghana, Alexander continually strives to empower young people with literature. “Every child has the potential to really excel at reading and writing,” he told Clark. “Do we give them that opportunity? Do they recognize they have the potential?” This includes his self-stated mission of bridging the gap between early enjoyment of reading and advanced literature such as the works of William Shakespeare.

Alexander also combines this mission with opportunities to speak to young people in the United States about social issues, including the problem of violence against African Americans. He affirmed his belief in the power of literature, specifically poetry, to help young people grow into tolerance and a better world. As he told Rachel Martin for National Public Radio’s *Weekend Edition Sunday* (10 July 2016), “If we don’t give them books that are mirrors as well as windows, if they aren’t able to see not only themselves, but if they aren’t able to see outside of themselves, then how can you expect them to be able to have something in their mind that allows them to connect with this person who looks different, who lives different than they are?”

## PERSONAL LIFE

Alexander and his wife, Stephanie, have two children, Nandi and Samayah. Speaking to Clark about the unexpected success of *The Crossover*, Alexander said, “I’ve always been that confident person who sort of knew his place in this world and that no one could define me for me.” He has multiple works going at the same time; if he is blocked on one, he moves to another. Alexander has deep connection to music, using jazz especially as an aid to writing. He also enjoys bossa nova and hip-hop. Basketball and tennis are his favorite sports.

## SUGGESTED READING

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## SELECTED WORKS

*Crush: Love Poems*, 2007; *Acoustic Rooster and His Backyard Band*, 2011; *The Crossover*, 2014; *Booked*, 2016

—Judy Johnson