

Q&A

A Conversation with

**Nikki
Grimes**

Author of

**Barack Obama:
Son of Promise,
Child of Hope**



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Q: There is so much information out there about Senator Obama, especially in these past few months. What inspired you to write a children's book about Barack Obama?

A: Initially, the project was brought to me by editors Justin Chanda and Alexandra Cooper. At the time, all I knew about Barack Obama is that he was a rising star in the Democratic Party, and that he'd thrown his hat in the ring to campaign for his party's nomination for President. That, in itself, had me intrigued. Then, as I researched his life, I discovered a rich story, parts of which (spear fishing in Hawaii, pet gibbons and pet crocodiles in Djakarta) virtually screamed kid-appeal. And it was a story bound to have enormous resonance with many of today's children who, like Obama was, are being raised by single parents, or who live with grandparents, or who wrestle with the impact of an absent father. Most importantly, his story is one of triumph, and children cannot read too many stories of winning against all odds. Such stories are especially important for children of color.

Q: Tell me about the research you did prior to writing this book.

A: The time frame for this book was short, and so I put myself on a daily reading regimen. I began with Obama's elegantly written memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, read parts of *The Audacity of Hope*, devoured countless speeches, quotes, audio clips and articles; and read an earlier juvenile biography by Marlene Targ Brill.

Q: How were you able to make Barack Obama's complicated life story age-appropriate and accessible for young children?

A: That is always the challenge. The only trick to it is to look at the material through a child's eyes. The other key is to simplify, simplify, simplify. For instance, rather than attempting to explain Obama's legislative work on the state level, or even the intricacies of street organizing, I focused on the goals of that work: to get people involved in the issues, to bring them together, to try to make life better for everyone. Those are concepts a child can wrap his mind around. Every aspect of Obama's complex story had to be simplified, to some extent. It isn't merely a matter of using a limited vocabulary. One has to keep in mind what is socially and emotionally age-appropriate, as well. In general, though, poetry is the perfect genre for compressing complex stories into a relatively small and accessible format. And, again, there was much in his story that had resonance for young readers.

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Q: What do you hope children will retain after reading this book?

A: That no matter where you begin in life, no matter what the color of your skin, if you believe in yourself, if you apply yourself, if you remember that God has a dream for you bigger than you can imagine, then anything is possible. The sky is truly the limit, and that sky now includes the possibility of becoming President of the United States of America.

Q: Why do you think it is important for children to be informed about our election process?

A: Because our democracy is one of the greatest things they will inherit. It is important for them to understand how it works, and the role each of us plays as citizens. Books such as *Barack Obama: Son of Promise, Child of Hope* won't necessarily teach them about the process of government, but it will open the discussion. If we can get children excited about the personalities in government, it's a short step to energizing their interest in the workings of that government.

Q: What are you working on next?

A: Two young adult novels and a picture book of historical fiction. I always seem to be juggling projects!

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