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Q & A with Teacher, Rapper, and Author Dwayne Reed

By Patricia J. Murphy | Aug 23, 2021

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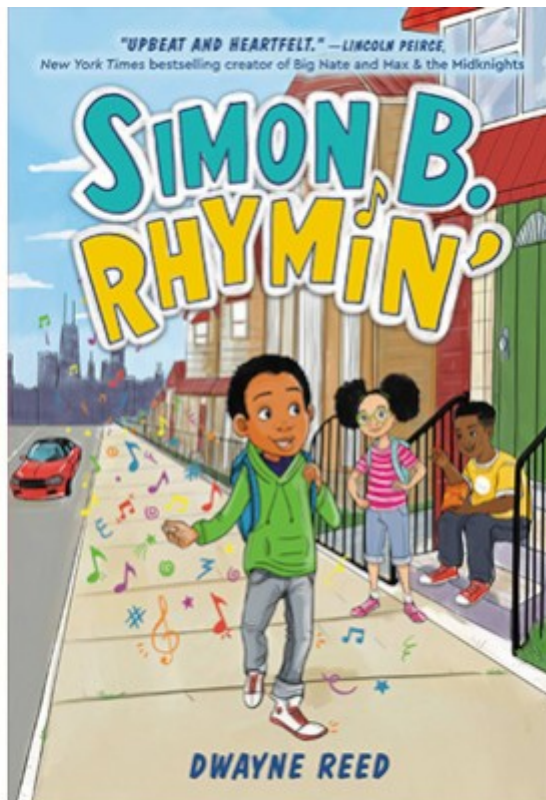
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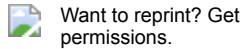
Dwayne Reed, who calls himself “America’s Rapping Teacher,” is the author of the debut middle grade novel *Simon B. Rhymin’* (Little, Brown), which he describes as “an ode to his younger self.” His Welcome to the 4th Grade rap video (with nearly two million views to date on YouTube) landed him interviews on local and national television shows (including Good

Morning America), an Old Navy campaign, and piqued the interest of his literary agent, Elizabeth Bewley and publisher, Little, Brown. In the midst of his back-to-school preparations, Reed spoke with PW about his rapping roots, the three R’s (rhythm, rhyme, and rapping) he uses to reach his “scholars,” fellow educators, and middle grade readers—and offers advice on how other teachers and librarians can, too.

How did you choose to become a teacher?

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I'm one of the oldest siblings in my family so being in charge led me to wanting to help, to lead, and to teach. Then, while I was figuring out what I wanted to do with my life, I took some aptitude tests that pointed to service jobs, and I developed a great love of working with kids. So I enrolled in classes at Eastern Illinois University, and earned my undergraduate degree in elementary education with middle school endorsements in language arts and social studies. This will be my fifth year in education at Theophilus Schmid Elementary School in Chicago. I recently took a position as dean of students.

While growing up, were there any teachers who inspired you?

First, there was Mr. K., my high school economics teacher. I didn't like economics, but I liked him. I was really excited to go to class! What he did for me as a student drives what I do now as a teacher. Because regardless of my scholars' interest in the content, my teaching is about their character

development and how I can reach them at a core level as humans.

Also, there was Mrs. Johnson, my geometry teacher. I remember once when she caught me writing rap lyrics in her class (I didn't like geometry either). She picked up my notebook, took a look at my lyrics, and bopped her head a bit. Then, she put down my notebook, and carried on with her business. To me, she was saying: "Keep at it. I support this. This is okay." And, I'm still rapping until this very day.

Where did your rapping roots sprout from?

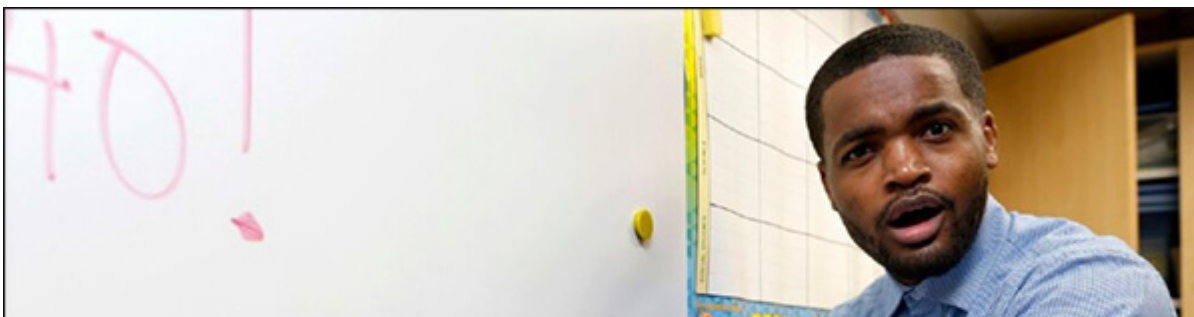
Since I could remember, my family has always been musically inclined, free-styling and making up songs, bops, and ditties. My uncle Mario also wrote poems and songs to make sense of the world around him. His writing was my first encounter with rhyme, rhythm, and poetry. I thought it was beautiful—and I wanted to be just like him. As early as fourth grade, I started writing my own raps to help me remember my spelling and vocabulary lists. It wasn't long until I discovered that it was something that could help me succeed in academics.

Fast forward to a few years ago, when you created the *Welcome to the 4th Grade* rap video for your students, which went viral. Can you tell us about the rap and others that you've created since?

I made *Welcome to the 4th Grade* when I was finishing my senior year of college and getting ready to student teach. I did it because I wanted to start my student teaching off with a bang! It was less about going viral and more about finding a cool way to introduce myself to my scholars and let them know the craziness that was in store for them with "Mr. Reed" as their teacher.

In addition to this video, I've made about 12 others including: *Stay Healthy*, *Little Mask*, *The Morning Song*, *Welcome Back to School*, and four videos for an Old Navy campaign. I worked with teachers in Milwaukee, Seattle, and Los Angeles to create their own back-to-school videos, and produced my own *Welcome Back to School*.

Creating videos takes a whole lot of planning and hard work. But, if I know it's going to benefit my scholars, other educators, and the people around me, it's all worth it. This is my "why".



You call your students "scholars"? Can you tell us your reason for this?



AP News

When I was little and I was bullied, and someone would call me ugly or say that I had a big head, my mom would always say I was beautiful, gorgeous—the handsomest! Those words stuck

with me. They had power. They were a self-fulfilling prophecy in terms of how I perceived myself.

So, when I thought about what I would call my students, I chose “scholars.” With this word, I want to say, “You are more than a student—you are a scholar. You are more than test scores. You are scholarly. You excel. You’re the cream of the crop—and Mr. Reed cares about you.” The more I say it, the more they will start believing it.

How do you believe rapping has influenced your teaching?

Rap has become a valuable teaching tool for me that has positively impacted my lessons, and allowed me to teach bigger themes. I also think using rap—something that I love to do—has encouraged my scholars to go after what they are interested in, and to see what is possible when you do.

On the flip side, how has teaching impacted your rap, and helped you write your debut novel *Simon B. Rhymin’*?

When I immerse myself in my scholars—not only how they perform academically or act behaviorally but in their interests, their stories, and what their lives look like outside of the classroom—I begin to develop a familiarity and understanding of who they are. Teaching allows me to know my audience and to tailor my messages to them. It also helps fine-tune my voice and informs my rhymes and raps.

Can you tell us more about your book? How did it come to be, and what inspired you to write it?

An agent, Elizabeth Bewly, reached out to me and asked me what stories I might like to write. I said that I wanted to tell the story of a young Black boy from Chicago who is small, but big in his heart, is bullied, loves to rap, and who has big dreams. This is my actual story—an ode to my younger self—that I wanted to put out into the world. It was around the same time the nation was becoming more aware of some of the inequities in our country that have been going on for hundreds of years. I thought about how I could tell my story without it being muddled or sensationalized, and not stray away from what truly happens here.

While writing *Simon B. Rhymin’*, it was important for me to tackle social issues in a very honest, authentic, nuanced, and contextualized way—much like *The Chi* on Showtime, but for kids. I’ve also been inspired by *Arthur* on PBS based on the books by Marc Brown. I loved how Brown wrote the Arthur stories. I know that Arthur is supposed to be an aardvark, but to me Arthur’s family, the Reads, is a *Black* family. I liked how they displayed a diversity of skin colors throughout the show. I wanted to do the same thing with Simon, too.

As a result, I wrote my story and the stories of some of my scholars who live on the West Side of Chicago. I have another Simon story, *Simon B. Rhymin’ Takes a Stand*, coming out next year, and a picture book, *All Good in the Hood* (Little, Brown) after that.

What do you hope to accomplish with your teaching, videos, and books—and as another poet, Mary Oliver, called, “your one wild and precious life”?

When adults and kids see my teaching videos, I hope they see that learning can be fun. When kids read *Simon B. Rhyming*, I want them to think that regardless of what size they are, or what odds are stacked against them, that they can do something, be somebody, and use their voice.

My hope for my life as a whole is to be a light that keeps on shining, and a wildfire of goodness and hope that you cannot contain. I am thinking: legacy change. I want lives, whole families, and entire communities to be changed for the better. That's how I approach every video, every book, every lesson, and every day in my classroom. What I hope shines through is that I'm biggin' up my people—I am championing them, celebrating them, elevating them, and lifting them up. I'm rooting for everyone who is Black.

Do you have any advice for teachers and librarians who might like to try the three Rs: rhyming, rhythm, and rapping?

Don't be afraid to look goofy, to sound "off," or to get flustered when the rhythm isn't right. What your scholars will appreciate is that you are giving it a shot, stepping into their world and giving it a chance. Figure out what your "shtick" is. Mine was a Black boy who was bullied and wanted to become a rapper. Whatever it is, marry that to poetry... and you've got magic.

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