

HOW THE BOOGYMAN BECAME A POET

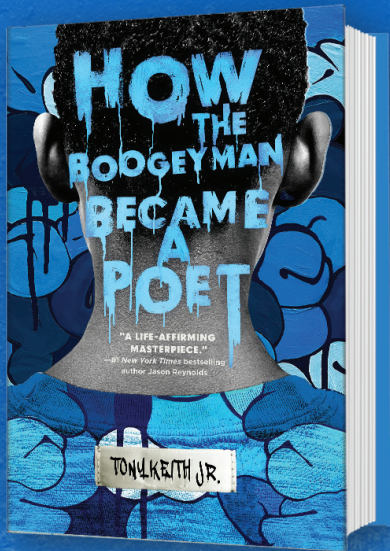
EDUCATOR GUIDE

TONY KEITH JR.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TONY KEITH JR. is a Black American gay poet, spoken word artist, and hip-hop educational leader from Washington, DC. He is author of the YA memoir in verse *How the Boogeyman Became a Poet*. Tony's writings have appeared in the *International Journal of Critical Media Literacy*, the *Journal of Black Masculinity*, and many others. A multiyear Fellow of the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities with a PhD in education from George Mason University, Tony is CEO of Ed Emcee Academy and lives with his husband, Harry Christian III, in his DC hometown. Visit him at tonykeithjr.com.



ABOUT THE BOOK

An electric memoir in verse by renowned poet and hip-hop educational leader Dr. Tony Keith Jr., *How the Boogeyman Became a Poet* is an honest and heartfelt recollection of a young man finding himself one word at a time. High school senior Tony is “the man with the poems” (pg. 23) that are his voice and freedom from cantankerous teachers, broke first-gen college doubts, and the pressures of just being. Poems are his one defense against the Boogeyman that’s been with him since forever, amplifying every fear about Tony’s Blackness, his future, and his feelings for other boys. But the Boogeyman has a weak spot, and as Tony finds answers through his “own way of knowing” (pg. 108), he sears his words into pages and leaves microphones smoking with the truest parts of himself.

DEAR READER,

I am the author of *How the Boogeyman Became a Poet*—a love story told through a YA memoir in verse about discovering my poetic voice while becoming a first-generation college student and coming out of the closet as gay. Set in the Washington, DC, metro area during the late '90s, these are rhythmic stories about moments in my life when I had no choice but to write poetry to win battles against “the Boogeyman.” I explain how I developed a fear of being too black or too soft to feel safe, and about not having language to describe systemic racism, poverty, homophobia, and white supremacy.

I wrote this book after discovering a need for YA literature featuring the voices of black gay authors, particularly of a poet and spoken word artist who knows how to move crowds on stages and at schools, colleges, universities, libraries, and museums. I know how necessary stories like mine are for young readers who desire to see themselves not only reflected in the characters but in the writing. I love this book because I finally allowed my poetic voice the freedom to tell my story on the page, in my own way—with all the metaphors, rhyming, alliteration, imagery, and wordplay.

Ultimately, I write to black gay men and boys and the people who love us, and I hope that readers of *How the Boogeyman Became a Poet* rethink, reimagine, remix, and, perhaps, take social action on how people like me:us:we are truly loved in public.

PEACE,

Anthony “Tony” Keith Jr.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe the memoir genre in your own words. How is it different from an autobiography? Discuss the author's decision to write a memoir in verse. How does poetry shape his storytelling and your reading? What does poetry do that prose doesn't?
2. The book opens with poems about Tony's birth and early childhood, a time most of us don't actually remember ourselves but learn about from others. How does this idea of learning about oneself through words and stories relate to the book as a whole? What are some things you've learned about yourself through stories?
3. Choose three of the poems that Tony writes on notebook paper or his computer. Read all of them in these three different ways: silently, out loud to yourself, and out loud to a listener. What's different about each reading of the poems—what changes about them or about you as their reader? Which way of reading feels most true to each of the poems you chose?
4. Describe the similarities and differences between "self-affirmation" and "self-determination." What's the relationship between these two concepts? What role does each play in Tony's relationship with poetry? With his faith? With his community? With his identities?
5. What is code-switching? Look it up if you're unfamiliar and then define it in your own words. Discuss Tony's code-switching in the story. When does he do it and why? Consider not only his switching between African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and standard English but also his switching between the "straight script" and his own queerness or between his poetry and any other kind of expression.
6. Discuss Tiffany's borrowed method for writing away fear. Why might writing out one's fears and literally throwing them away help remove "their superficial power" (pg. 111)? How does this affirming aspect of words and expression play out in the rest of the story? Where does it appear in Tony's poetry? How does it relate to his decision not to come out to his family and friends by the end of the book?
7. What is the Boogeyman? Describe it in your own words using support from the text. Consider the moments when it seems to appear and how/why it derails Tony. Consider also how it intersects with the challenges of poverty, racism, and homophobia. How would you describe your own Boogeyperson?
8. Tony goes through two different but intertwined self-discoveries regarding his Blackness and his gayness. Discuss how these paths of discovery are related—how they are similar and how they are different. How does Tony learning about himself and finding ways to be himself on and off the page relate to his Boogeyman?
9. After following Tony on his paths toward self-discovery and seeing when and how the Boogeyman accompanies him, what do you make of this book's title? In what ways does the Boogeyman become a poet? Use the text to support your answer.
10. Why is the author of this memoir sharing his story? What does he hope readers will find in his poetry and take with them? What details in the text make you think so? What moments in the text do you find most memorable?

READ-ALIKE SUGGESTIONS

NOVELS IN VERSE

- *Every Body Looking* by Candice Iloh
- *Me (Moth)* by Amber McBride
- *A Million Quiet Revolutions* by Robin Gow
- *Nothing Burns As Bright As You* by Ashley Woodfolk
- *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo

MEMOIRS AND POETRY COLLECTIONS

- *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson
- *Black Flamingo* by Dean Atta
- *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson
- *Dark Testament: Blackout Poems* by Crystal Simone Smith
- *Ordinary Hazards* by Nikki Grimes
- *You Don't Even Know Me* by Sharon Flake

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

REVIEW BY YOU

As a class, read at least three trade reviews and up to five reader reviews of *How the Boogeyman Became a Poet*. Check with your school or public librarians for help accessing reviews. Which reviews do the students agree or disagree with and why? Discuss what goes into a well-written review, and together, write a review of the book—decide as a class whether the review will recommend or not recommend the book. Next, have students work on their own or in pairs and choose another book to read and review (see the Read-Alike list for ideas or have students chat with a librarian for suggestions). Remind students of the components of a well-written review (including what they should avoid) and provide a word limit.

RAPS THAT SLAP, POEMS THAT SLAM

Give students a choice between a class rap battle or poetry slam (or both!). The rules can follow the slam rules mentioned in the book or the class can create its own rules, but both scenarios should include content guidelines regarding hurtful or inappropriate language. Consider picking a theme for each round or allowing participants to freestyle. If you score participants, judges should be randomly selected or chosen from outside the class (if the latter, consider rounding up volunteers among your colleagues ahead of time). Students less interested in the mic can participate by keeping time, introducing participants, recording (if the class agrees), tracking scores, and hyping up the competitors.

SPEAKING UP

Lead a discussion that imagines that *How the Boogeyman Became a Poet* has been removed from your school or public library due to complaints about sexual content, LGBTQIA+ content, and “critical race” content. As a class, take a look at the data collected by the American Library Association and PEN America about book ban trends and discuss the books that have been banned on similar grounds. What do book banners mean when they cite this kind of content? What is their argument against these books being accessible on library shelves or in a school? In small groups, have students write a short, two-minute response that defends *How the Boogeyman Became a Poet* and challenges the decision to remove it. Groups should research the person or group empowered to remove books from the school or public library and address their response accordingly.

SPITTING TRUTH

For this activity, have students choose one of the following options:

- **Create a Boogeyman playlist.** Music features in several parts of Tony’s life and experiences. Create a playlist of no fewer than ten songs that capture “the Boogeyman.” Annotate each song with three to five sentences about how the song fits Tony’s Boogeyman or your own Boogeyperson. Explore the songs and artists mentioned in the book and existing Spotify playlists for inspiration.
- **Write a poem to Dr. Keith, the book’s author.** Dr. Keith is a poet and spoken word artist speaking to you, his reader, in this book. Now it’s your turn to take the stage. Write a poem in return that shares something about who you are. Your poem should be at least 500 words, but form, rhythm, rhyme, etc. are up to you. Consider including connections you’ve made between Tony’s story and your own, and look to some of the poems in the book or your own favorite poets’ work for ideas.

YOUTH POETRY & STORYTELLING RESOURCES

- #TeenWritersProject
- Young Storytellers
- Ed Emcee Academy
- Teachers & Writers Collaborative
- The Poetics of Hip Hop
- Youth, Educators and Storytellers (YES)