

Kwame Alexander gives author talk on Wednesday at TACAW

Monday, February 13, 2023
Kimberly Nicoletti

Black history is usually told through stories of African Americans' experience in the United States, but Kwame Alexander wants to expand that narrative and he's doing it one word, and one book, at a time.

The New York Times bestselling author's latest young adult novel, "The Door of No Return," takes place in 1860. As the first of a trilogy set in Ghana, it tells the story of an 11-year-old boy, Kofi, and his village and African family.

"I wanted to look at the beginning of our journey, before we were stolen and taken to America," Alexander said. "The single narrative of black people has been defined by what has happened to us. I wanted to focus on our humanity. Black people laugh, cope, dance, dream, live, love and die just like everyone else. ... Sometimes we forget that our humanity is what defines us."

"The door of no return" is both literal and metaphorical. Kwame personally visited Cape Coast Castle, a dungeon built by the Portuguese to hold Africans, then force them through a large door leading to the water, where slave ships awaited.

In Kwame's book, Kofi likes the same girl his bully of a cousin has a



Kwame Alexander speak Wednesday at TACAW as part of Aspen Winter Words. Photo Credit Portia Higgins

crush on, so they plan to compete in a swim-off. Kofi's family has warned him to stay out of the river at night, and when he doesn't listen, his world turns upside down.

"What happens to him changes his life and his story," Alexander said, as Kofi enters "the door of no return."

In his books, Alexander employs powerful, rhythmic language, which he tests out on his daughter to see if it's palatable as he talks about heavy subjects. One passage in "The Door of No Return" reads:

"On the other side of the door is the edge of the mighty blue that Nana Mosi has talked about, that I have dreamed about — a body of water so awesome and large it could breathe a million clouds, drag the moon across its

gigantic waves. But this is not a dream I am trying to climb out of. This roaring blue is an angry nightmare. It is a monstrous mouth. And it is wide enough to swallow us whole."

The novel is Alexander's 36th book. He grew up in an artistic family and wrote his first poem for his mom on Mother's Day at age 12. But it was another woman who led him to become a poet. After graduating from college, he wrote a poem every day for a girl he liked, "until she married me," he said. He self-published a dozen books until a woman working in the publishing world heard him read at a literary conference. She appreciated his voice and asked if he'd consider writing for young people.

"She said, If it's good, I'll

publish it," he said, adding that he "walks through life as a willing participant."

And so in 2014, she published his first middle-grade book, "He Said, She Said," which fused social protest and star-crossed romance between two high school seniors.

Still, his Newbery Award winner, "The Crossover," was rejected by 22 publishers before HMH Books for Young Readers took a chance on the 251-page novel, which he told in a series of poems. The novel struck a chord, and in April it will air as a series on Disney+.

Though he doesn't want to "teach" kids, he does aim to entertain, inspire, engage and spark feelings of empathy and understanding.

"I'm probably a closet teacher, but I don't want to beat kids over the head," he said.

Rather, he wants to help them connect to each other's humanity.

"Words are powerful. Literature can ultimately transform us and make us feel more confident in who we are. It's a mirror of ourselves and a window to other people. I bring people together through the power of my words. My ultimate hope is that I inspire and empower young people."

Though "The Door of No Return" revolves around Alexander's love of water — the joy and beauty he finds in it — he often uses basketball in novels to convey his message that "We should never let anyone lower our goals. We should shoot for the sun, and eventually we will shine."

He will approach his Wednesday night talk at TACAW like a jazz

musician.

"I'm a big fan of improv and riffing. I'll get in front of the audience and feel the vibe and feel how they inspire me and how I'm inspired," he said. "I imagine it's cold out there. I'm going to bring fire."