Kwame Alexander gives author talk on Wednesday at TACAW

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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 time.


“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 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
“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.”