



LET ME HEAR A RHYME

Tiffany D. Jackson



Book synopsis

In this striking new novel by the critically acclaimed author of *Allegedly* and *Monday's Not Coming*, Tiffany D. Jackson tells the story of three Brooklyn teens who plot to turn their murdered friend into a major rap star by pretending he's still alive.

Brooklyn, 1998. Biggie Smalls was right: Things done changed. But that doesn't mean that Quadir and Jarrell are cool letting their best friend Steph's music lie forgotten under his bed after he's murdered—not when his rhymes could turn any Bed Stuy corner into a party.

With the help of Steph's younger sister Jasmine, they come up with a plan to promote Steph's music under a new rap name: the Architect. Soon, everyone wants a piece of him. When his demo catches the attention of a hotheaded music label rep, the trio must prove Steph's talent from beyond the grave.

As the pressure of keeping their secret grows, Quadir, Jarrell, and Jasmine are forced to confront the truth about what happened to Steph. Only, each has something to hide. And with everything riding on Steph's fame, they need to decide what they stand for or lose all that they've worked so hard to hold on to—including each other.

For students:

In reading this story, you're going to travel straight to the place where it was born, New York City. Whether you're reading this book from a city somewhere as close to one of the five boroughs as Philadelphia or Washington DC, or from a place as far away as Salt Lake City, this guide will bring you into the time, the place, and the music that captured the heartbeat, the pulse of a generation. You may or may not have people in your life who look, act, and sound like Quady, Jarrell, Jasmine and Steph, but if you're young, and you've ever heard of hip-hop, or New York City, you'll appreciate their journey and perhaps see a little of them in you and yourself in them.

For teachers:

African-American vernacular English, also known as AAVE or "Black English" has roots as old as the foundation of this country. You've heard it in hip-hop, you may have heard it used among your students, you may even speak using its tones, phrases and inflections yourself. Reading this book may open your eyes to a world that has always existed around you and allow you to see it with fresh eyes. Teaching this book will give you the opportunity to appreciate the musicality and originality of people and language specific to and born in Brooklyn. Learning its language will unlock a musical world rich in cultural history and artistic complexity, a world that remains alive today preserved in hip-hop lyrics (also known as "bars") and on every urban neighborhood in America.

Thematic Discussion Questions:

Consider Steph's funeral at the beginning of the novel with Biggie's funeral in chapter 4. How do the two compare? How are they different? How does the community handle murder, death, loss and grieving one of their own? Given what you know about the novel's premise, how might this moment foreshadow what's to come for the Jasmine, Quadir, and Jarrell?

What do readers learn about each of the principal characters families? How are they structured? How does this compare/contrast with your own?

On page 76 and 77, a conversation between Jarrell and Steph reveals some of the first clues about what may have lead to Steph's murder. Predict what you think might have happened. What might these predictions reveal about your beliefs, biases, knowledge, or ignorance about Brooklyn and kids from this corner of the world?

What are the implications of embedding references to stories of resistance and excellence from African-American history and pop-culture throughout this novel, the names of various hip-hop groups, and song lyrics? Consider the impact this might have on youth from historically marginalized or disenfranchised backgrounds as well as those unfamiliar with their history.

Though drugs and gangs are mentioned in the novel, it is ultimately a story about friendship, love, loyalty, and hip-hop. To what extent do you believe hip-hop music and culture accurately portrays the realities of life in urban America?

▶ Quadir

What does Chapter 8 reveal about Quadir's love for his friend Steph and the way he handles grief after his death?

What do readers learn in Chapter 12 about Quadir's future plans? How do these differ from the dreams his mother has for him?

Why is Quadir conflicted about his feelings for Jasmine? What is the secret he withholds from her? Why doesn't he want to come clean?

▶ Jasmine

What can readers learn about Jasmine through her connection to Lauryn Hill and the specific songs mentioned? ("Tell Him", "Doo Wop", "Nothing Even Matters", etc.)

On page 130, Quadir refers to Jasmine as a, "fifteen-year-old project chick" which means she's, "at least twenty-one mentally." What do you think that means? What ideas do you have about "project chicks" and Black femininity. How do messages about and by women in hip-hop confirm/disrupt these ideas?

Compare and contrast Steph and Jasmine. What are the ways the hip-hop world is biased against women and in favor of men? What does Jasmine do to disrupt people's ideas of what women in hip-hop could/can do? In your opinion, is she successful?

▶ Jarrell

How does Jarrell's Jamaican ethnicity shape his character and world view? Consider diction, syntax, as well as any other clues you can find through dialogue he has with other characters.

In Chapter 19, Jarrell is targeted by the police in an incident of racial profiling. In your experience, what are the factors that lead to racial profiling? How does Jackson's description of the scene from Jarrell's perspective challenge socially constructed ideas about police brutality?

In Chapter 25, Jarrell gets a real lesson in the connection between hip-hop and African-American history. What is the connection between Jarrell, the group Black Star and Marcus Garvey? Why might this lineage be important for him, specifically?

▶ Steph

On page 27, Jarrell says, "Yo, son, let me hear a rhyme or something." What follows is an original rhyme. What do you learn about Steph, his life and neighborhood from this first rap?

What can you learn about Steph's character from his raps? How does he feel about his friends, his community? What plans does he have for his future? Compare this with the end of the novel. What do you know about Steph now? Compare/contrast this with what you thought at the beginning.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

PRE-READING

1) In this novel, the location is in a way, it's own character. New York City, the burroughs, specific streets, neighborhoods, and subway stops each have their own unique significance. What do you know about New York City and the Five Boroughs? Find it on the map, then research the history of the area. What are the largest or most prominent ethnic and cultural groups from each borough? What are some historic spots or streets in each area? Find a map of the area, then, annotate the image using Thinglink (or any other resource) to share what you've discovered. Most New Yorkers use public transportation at some point in their lives to get from Point A to B. Use the map found here to plan a route between two burroughs, or any of the places mentioned in the book using the NYC subway or other public transit system.

ESSAY PROMPT

Analyze Jackson's use of diction, imagery, descriptive language, syntax, and sensory detail in the scenes that bring Brooklyn to life. How is the borough a character in and of itself? Consider outward appearance, as well as characteristics specific to Brooklyn that may not exist anywhere else. Use text evidence to support your response.

DURING READING

2) There are many words and phrases throughout the text in African-American Vernacular English (or AAVE), including words that are specific to Brooklyn and New York City. Keep a journal or class list of important and re-occurring words and phrases. Use context clues, your own knowledge, and knowledge from what you know of language used in hip-hop lyricism to help you define them. How does your ability to understand the text increase as you become familiar with common words and phrases?

3) There are many songs mentioned throughout the novel. Keep track each time one is mentioned that you don't already know about, haven't already heard, then search for it on Genius.com and keep a dialectical journal of any particularly meaningful lines or phrases. Remember, Hip-hop is poetry. Use your knowledge, the official playlist for the novel, and this list of commonly used poetic devices to analyze any of the songs and lyrics you find. What connections can you make to your life, social issues in the world?

4) On page 65, Quadir, Jarrell and Jasmine have to decide what "kind" of rapper Steph is going to be. Classify rappers you know of as "underground", "conscious", "gangsta" or "crossover" rappers. Create your own category if none of them will fit. Make a list of characteristics that belong to each category and use the book's playlist (or make your own) to categorize songs that match the characteristics for each type of rap.

POST-READING

5) On pages 137-138, Quadir, Steph, and Jarrell theorize about who killed Biggie and Pac. Conduct online research to explore possible answers to the following questions: Who killed Biggie and Pac? What are the conspiracy theories and myths that remain about their deaths? Consider the many tracks and albums that were released post-mortem. Use what you've learned to create your own timeline of events up to the present day. Compare/contrast your findings with the story about Steph and his rap persona, "The Architect" in Let Me Hear a Rhyme.

6) At its simplest, hip hop is poetry, so let's try it! Use the following instructions to draft your own rap, then form a cypher and let me hear a rhyme!

Hip Hop Lyricism or Spoken Word?

Elements of MCing (rap): 16-bar verse+hook/chorus

A BAR OF MUSIC:

A bar or measure is used in writing music. Each bar is a small amount of time. Simply stated a bar is one complete measure of music.

Each bar usually has the same number of beats in it.

Music that feels like 1-2-3-4-1-2-3-4 will be divided into bars with 4 beats worth of music in each bar.

After you complete the count of the first bar, instead of repeating with 1,2,3,4 repeat with 2,2,3,4, then 3,2,3,4 and so on. The first number represents the bar you are on. A 16-bar verse counted would look like...

1,2,3,4

2,2,3,4

3,2,3,4

4,2,3,4

etc.

The common structure for rap songs are 3 verses and 3 choruses. Every verse is usually 16 bars, with an 8-bar hook/chorus.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

From "Hip Hop & Spoken Word Therapy: The Art
& Necessity of Self-Expression

by Qiana Spellman

Let Me Hear a Rhyme Official Playlist
(YouTube) (Spotify)

Chapter 1 - Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to A

Tribe Called Quest by Hanif Abdurraquib

Can't Stop Won't Stop by Jeff Wang

The Rap Yearbook by Shea Serrano

She Begat This: 20 Years of the Miseducation of
Lauryn Hill by Joan Morgan



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tiffany D. Jackson is the author of critically acclaimed YA novels including the NAACP Image Award-nominated **ALLEGEDLY**, the Walter Dean Myers Honored **MONDAY'S NOT COMING** and **LET ME HEAR A RHYME**. She received her bachelor of arts in film from Howard University, her master of arts in media studies from the New School, and has over a decade in TV/Film experience. The Brooklyn native is a lover of naps, cookie dough, and beaches, currently residing in the borough she loves, most likely multitasking.

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