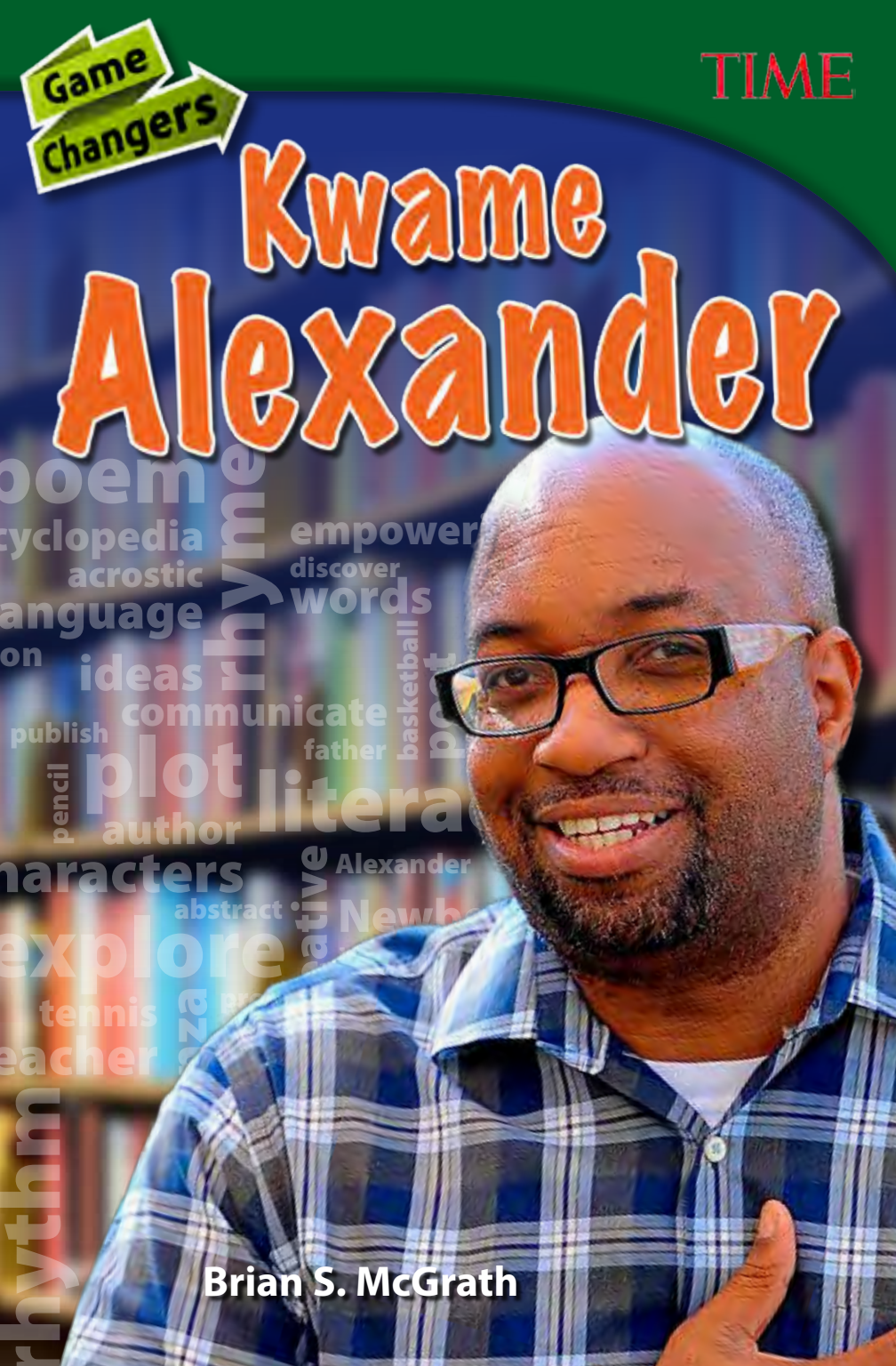
Game Changers

TIME

Kwame Alexander



Brian S. McGrath

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Miles to Go

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In the early morning of Thanksgiving 1986, a red Thunderbird speeds up the New Jersey Turnpike toward New York City. Father's at the wheel, Mother is in the front seat. A 16-year-old boy sleeps in the back, and a younger sister, Sia, is sleeping, too. The youngest sister, Nataki, is singing softly with the radio: "Darling, darling, stand by me."

The boy wakes to screaming as the car swerves, flips, and rolls over three times, coming to rest on its roof. There's a tinkling of glass, and the boy curses. "Watch your language," his father admonishes.

They crawl out of the wreckage through the broken windows as cars pull over and people hastily race to the overturned Thunderbird. The trunk has popped open, and crates litter the surrounding area, scattering books. The father circles the car. "Help me get these books up," he says to the son as trucks **barrel** down the road. *We've just had an accident and he's worried about his books*, the boy thinks. But he has to help.



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The boy's name, like his father's, is Edward, but the family uses his middle name: Kwame. He has a secret, though his father already knows it deep down—Kwame hates words and he hates books, and this is mostly because of his father.

At the hospital, someone says that it's a miracle no one was hurt. Kwame's mother has an explanation: her children have other destinies to fulfill in which they're going to do great things.

The Storyteller

Barbara Alexander was her son's earliest role model. Kwame's sister Nataki describes her as "always encouraging and believing in us." Barbara is also a published author. One of her more popular works is *Papa's Penny Party*, a story based on memories of her grandfather's store.



A House of Words

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Kwame Alexander was born in 1968 in New York City. At the time, his father, E. Curtis Alexander, also known as Al, was a **doctoral** student at Bank Street Graduate School of Education. He was also studying to become a Baptist minister. Kwame's mother, Barbara, was a teacher and a storyteller who could hold a classroom of children in **rapture** over an African American folktale. She played all the characters, every one of them coming alive through the sound of her voice.

At the family home in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, Barbara would read poetry by Lucille Clifton and Dr. Seuss to her children. She would also sing to them while making breakfast. Kwame loved his family, and he loved words and books. For him, there was almost no separation between family and literature. So when it was time to choose a name for his baby sister, six-year-old Kwame took his favorite book of poetry, *Spin a Soft Black Song* by Nikki Giovanni, from the shelf. He opened to the first poem and read the first line: "come nataki dance with me."

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The Princess of Poetry

Nikki Giovanni, seen in the photo to the right, first became well known in the 1960s, writing poems influenced by the civil rights movement. In 1987, she became an English professor at Virginia Tech. Starting that year, Kwame would enroll in her advanced poetry class—three years in a row.

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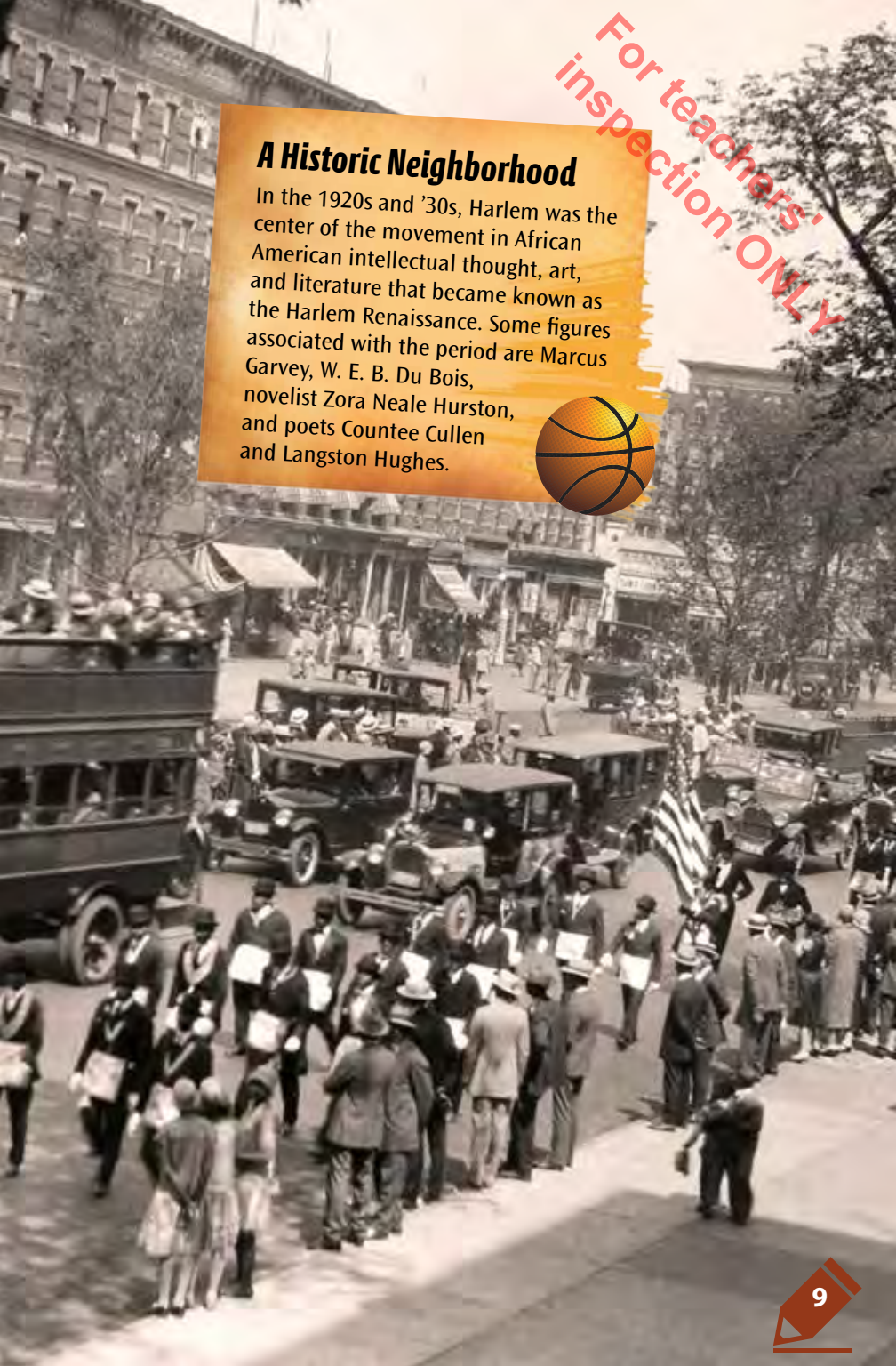
Life Lessons

Curtis Alexander was always quizzing his kids. You couldn't walk by him without him dragging you back with a geography question. At the supermarket he would ask, "If I use this coupon, how much will I save?" He made sure his children knew African American history. He also ran his own publishing company specializing in books about African American life—biographies, histories, scholarly **tomes**, and stories for children. He'd set up a table on a street in Harlem, selling books to anyone who'd buy them.

When Kwame was 12 years old, his family moved to Chesapeake, Virginia. Every Thanksgiving they'd load up a rental car with crates of books and head back to New York City to sell them at a book fair. This was Kwame's first job, manning the table all day with his sisters and helping potential buyers with their questions. It wasn't hard for Kwame and Nataki to become experts on writers such as Walter Dean Myers or Alice Walker, when it was their job to recommend books to customers. Still, it was grueling work, and whenever the chance came, the children would sneak out to a nearby **soul food** eatery for fried fish. Later, their father would take them to their favorite Chinese restaurant. So, despite the hard work, there were perks.

The Soldier

During the Civil War, Kwame's great-grandfather fought for the Union Army at the Battle of Chaffin's Farm and New Market Heights, Virginia, in September 1864. It was a terrible battle. Sixteen African American soldiers in the 6th United States Colored Infantry Regiment won Medals of Honor. This battle paved the way for the Union army's capture of both Petersburg and Richmond during the final months of the war.



A Historic Neighborhood

In the 1920s and '30s, Harlem was the center of the movement in African American intellectual thought, art, and literature that became known as the Harlem Renaissance. Some figures associated with the period are Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois, novelist Zora Neale Hurston, and poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes.

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Reader's Guide

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1. What made the young Kwame Alexander hate books? What changed his mind?
2. How did Alexander's relationship with his father influence his writing?
3. In what ways does reading about Alexander's life cause you to reflect on your own life experiences?
4. What can Alexander's story teach readers about the craft of writing?

