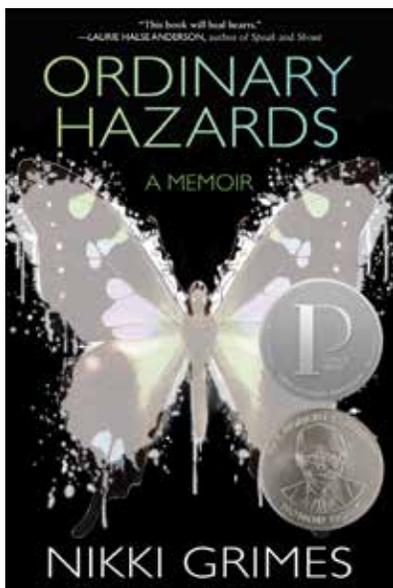


# ORDINARY HAZARDS

A MEMOIR

NIKKI GRIMES

## A Discussion Guide with Common Core State Standard Correlations



### ABOUT THE BOOK

As a six-year old, Nikki Grimes began to write down her thoughts on paper, releasing feelings of sadness and anger, confusion and fear. In this beautiful and heart-breaking memoir, Grimes uses powerful poems to share not only the trauma of her childhood, but the moments of grace that allowed her to write a different future for herself.

“[A] testimony and a triumph.”—Jason Reynolds, author of *Long Way Down*

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In “On Our Own” in Book One, Grimes recounts a childhood trauma. Her sister, Carol, comforts Nikki, and, when their mother discovers the awful truth, Carol berates her for not believing them sooner. This is the first time Carol is shown defending her younger sister, but it is not the last. How is Carol more like a mother to Nikki? Why is their mother unable to care for Nikki and Carol? (22)

(CCSS Literacy 9-10.1)

The poem “Family” ends with a heartbreaking question. What does the author ask of her relatives? (27)

(CCSS Literacy 9-10.1)

At the start of Book Two, the author offers a poem that begins with “Search my life for luck, and bad is all you’ll find.” Yet the poem ends on a very different note. What allows the author to overcome the bad luck in her life? (39)

(CCSS Literacy 9-10.1)

For Nikki, the poems “Secret” and “Journey” in Book Two chronicle the beginning of her “life in notebooks.” She describes “this writing thing” as “some kind of magic trick.” Why was it like magic? What did writing do for Nikki? (60-61)

(CCSS Literacy 9-10.1)

Describe Nikki’s foster family in Ossining. How do you know Ossining has become home for Nikki?

(CCSS Literacy 9-10.1)

In Book Three, Nikki’s mom has remarried and is ready to take Nikki and Carol home. Nikki is devastated to leave her loving foster family—“they deserved a gift for tending me in the garden of their family”—but is cautiously optimistic about living with her mother again. In “Ding, Ding, Ding,” Nikki’s optimism shifts to wariness: “[this] rang a bell of worry about what kind of trouble we might be in for.” Why is she concerned? (105 and 112)

(CCSS Literacy 9-10.1)

In a notebook entry, Nikki writes about missing her Dad and wonders where he is. Later, in “Absentee,” she finds out why she hasn’t seen him. What’s kept her father from visiting? (121)

(CCSS Literacy 9-10.1)

As Nikki’s mother descends again into mental illness, Nikki struggles with her mother’s increasingly disturbing spells: “Every damned episode wore another hole in my soul.” How does she describe the process of getting her mother committed? How does she describe the psychiatric ward? (148)

(CCSS Literacy 9-10.1)

When Nikki is assaulted by her stepfather, even her writing can't comfort her: ". . . I couldn't for the life of me, write the pain away. I couldn't write about any of it, at all." (178) After so much trauma and sadness, Nikki has come to a breaking point. But she doesn't break: "I pack my tears away. Tears belong to people who are weak, something I swear to never be again." (185) How does Nikki's trauma change her?  
(CCSS Literacy 9-10.1)

In Book Four, Nikki's life takes a turn for the better. With her stepfather gone, Nikki begins to spend more time with her father. What interests do they share? She also spends more time with her grandmother, and not only shares a love of words with her, but begins to see her in a different light. How does her grandmother show her love? And how does Nikki begin to view her mother differently?  
(CCSS Literacy 9-10.1)

When Nikki's mom fails to encourage and support Nikki, people like Willa Mae Jackson (her friend Debra's mom), and her English teachers, Mrs. Volcheck and Mrs. Wexler, bolster her spirits and believe in her talent. While the words of Nikki's mother are shadows, find examples from the text where other people's words bring light to Nikki's life.  
(CCSS Literacy 9-10.1)

After the sudden and tragic death of Nikki's father, she wonders "Why'd my father, the one parent who knew my heart, have to die?" In the next poem, Nikki's mother betrays her in a way that is so gut-wrenching, it is not surprising what happens next. How does Nikki respond to her mother's betrayal? Who is there to support her? (306)  
(CCSS Literacy 9-10.1)

In the poem, "The Copa," Nikki is struck by the crowds admiring "a dark, caramel-colored smallish man." She asks who he is: "A famous author," her father answers "with unfamiliar awe." After her father's tragic death, Mrs. Wexler gives her a copy of James Baldwin's novel *Another Country*, and when Nikki looks at the book jacket, she recognizes the man from the Copa. Later, in "Epilogue," she has an encounter with James Baldwin. What happens? How do you think that meeting affected Nikki? (259, 296, 313)  
(CCSS Literacy Reading: Literature 9-10.9)

### POST-READING ACTIVITIES

In Book Two, the poems "Word Play" and "Word Garden" give evidence of the author's love of words. And, in "Felony on Fallow Ground" in Book Four she writes: "A voice inside me whispered urgently: *You cannot blossom in this soil.*" What words and phrases sang to you? (80, 93, 308)  
(CCSS Literacy Speaking and Listening 9-10.1)

At the start of Book Two, there is a poem called "The Mystery of Memory #1." In this poem, the author struggles with recalling "logical sequences, and smooth transitions." She regrets that she has "Only scraps of

knowing wedged between blank spaces." At the end of the poem, she writes "I am the widow, and this is my mite." What does that mean? Where does that allusion come from? (38)  
(CCSS Literacy Reading: Literature 9-10.9)

In "Grandma Sally," Nikki is invited to visit her great-grandmother in the South. Nikki's homelife is chaotic, and she admits that the trip would be "a break from the madness that was home." Yet she refuses to go. Why? In the same poem, she wrote "The ghost of Emmett Till hung heavy from the time I was five." (158) Later, in "Six O'Clock News" she watches James Meredith on the screen, struggling to get through the doors at Ole Miss. (161) Who were Emmett Till and James Meredith?  
(CCSS Literacy SL 9-10.1; History 9-10)

For much of Book Four, Nikki shows how the turbulent and tragic events of the 1960s are seared in her memory. In "June 1964," Nikki cries for "Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner." (239) Who were they and why did Nikki cry? Later, in a notebook entry on page 294, Nikki refers to Stokely Carmichael, a civil rights activist. Research Stokely Carmichael's impact on the civil rights movement.  
(CCSS Literacy History 9-10; SL 9-10.1)

John Oliver Killens. Zora Neale Hurston. Langston Hughes. LeRoi Jones. Rosa Guy. Gwendolyn Brooks. Henry Dumas. Chinua Achebe. (283) In the poem "Michaux's," Nikki Grimes imagines a future where her books share space with these authors. Select one of those authors and research his or her life and work.  
(CCSS Literacy Reading: Literature 9-10.10)

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Throughout the book, the author shares her love of reading. Here is a list of some of the books that kept Nikki Grimes company when she was young:

*Another Country* by James Baldwin  
*The Diary of Anne Frank*  
*Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott  
*No Longer at Ease* by Chinua Achebe  
*Pippi Longstocking* by Astrid Lindgren  
*The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran  
*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith

Guide written by Jane Becker