



# Beyond the Secret Garden Rap, Rhythm and Rhyme

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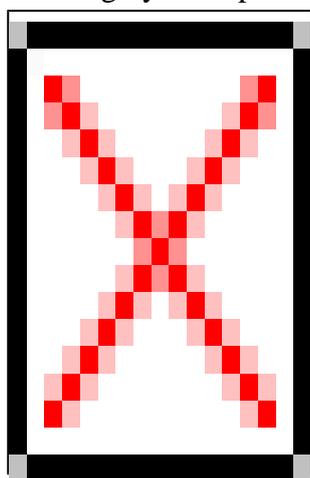
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Byline:

The impact of rap, rhythm and rhyme

In the latest in their **Beyond the Secret Garden** articles, Darren Chetty and Karen Sands O'Connor examine lyrics and the language of rap and hip-hop.

One of the most highly anticipated books of 2019 must surely be Angie Thomas' follow-up to the New York Times



Bestseller [On the Come Up](#) [4] and multi award-winning **The Hate U Give** (2017). [On the Come Up](#) [4] is the tale of sixteen-year-old Bri who has ambitions to be one of the greatest rappers of all time whilst dealing with the loss of her father, racist security staff at school and the threat of gang violence. Thomas describes the story as a 'love letter to those black girls who are often made to feel as if they are somehow both too much and not enough' as well as 'a love letter to hip-hop'. She continues, 'When I couldn't find myself in books, I found myself in the rhymes written by MCs who looked like me and shared my experiences. These unconventional poets were my heroes, and are the heroes for millions of young people.'

As a former MC herself, Thomas is part of a generation of writers who are dismantling a wall they encountered in their own childhoods - that between the books they encountered that so often failed to reflect their realities and the hip hop music that showcased the creativity of black writers. Over the past decade or so, a number of hip-hop influenced children's and young adult books have been published, mostly by a generation of writers who, like Thomas, grew up on hip-hop music.

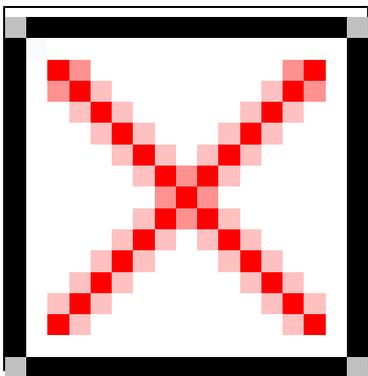
In **When The Beat Was Born: DJ Kool Herc and the Creation of Hip Hop** (2013) Laban Carrick Hill III tells the story of the genesis of hip-hop. Written in rhyme, with illustrations by Theodore Taylor III, the book traces Clive Campbell's journey from his Jamaican childhood to becoming DJ and co-organiser, with his sister Cindy, of the first hip-hop party in 1973.

Just as hip-hop music developed out of mixing records from different genres, the anthology **Hip Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry with a Beat**, edited by poet and activist Nikki Giovanni situates hip-hop's words in the form of rap within an African-American oral and written tradition. Here rappers Mos Def, Common and Queen

Latifah can be read as writers who are part of a tradition that includes Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Like Kool Herc, Benjamin Zephaniah was born in Jamaica and grew up listening to reggae. In [Gangsta Rap \[5\]](#) (2004), tells the story of three boys in east London who find success as controversial multiracial rap group *Positive Negatives*. Zephaniah does not shy away from the tensions and contradictions sometimes found in hip hop, including a passage that depicts a tense scene where a journalist interviews the band about the relative merits of Bob Marley and Tupac Shakur. When they are excluded from their school, they find an alternative sense of belonging in hip hop. Prem rejects his Indian mother's disdain for black music, instead embracing the band's motto; 'Let wordy great minds think alike, sweet Hip-Hop be our guiding light.' (226)

Whilst Zephaniah's current band *Revolutionary Minds* includes rapper Amy True, he himself first made his name as a dub poet in the reggae tradition. It was in the 1970s that a new generation of Black British writers begin to speak up against racism and police brutality that children's books in Britain began referencing music by people of colour in an overtly political way. Farrukh Dhondy's short story, 'Go Play Butterfly', in the collection **Come to Mecca** (Collins 1978) contrasts the cheerful music and costumes of the Notting Hill carnival of 1976 with the surveillance and brutality of white police officers. Esther, the main character, is happy in her butterfly costume, thinking to herself that 'she was a beauty and she could float and she felt high' (118) while dancing to the music; it is just at this moment that the band's leader comments, 'It's a fucking police Carnival' (118). Dhondy was writing in an era when many young poets, including Linton Kwesi Johnson, Accabre Huntley, and Valerie Bloom were first performing and publishing their poems, often with reference to reggae or even 'in the case of Linton Kwesi Johnson' with a reggae beat supporting their lyrics. For these authors, music was not just a symbol, not just a metaphor of the goodness or badness of a character, but a part of the politics. Therefore, Accabre Huntley can write in 'Blackman Brotherman' (*At School Today*, Bogle L'Ouverture 1976), that the 'dread' boys in rasta-striped hats 'want Peace' (31), using the language of reggae in poems that claim a space for Black Britons.



Another of 2018's book prize winners uses the language of hip-hop for his debut book. Karl Nova is a known on the London hip-hop scene and has been giving workshops in schools for a number of years. In the **CLiPPA** award-winning [Rhythm and Poetry](#) [6], Nova chooses, in his own words, 'to reflect on childhood through the lens of Hip Hop...viewing rap as the poetry of today'.

*'You will find me on rhythm and poetry street*

*where lyricism, poetic lines and the spoken word meet*

*the lines are blurry here it's hard to trace*

*but for me it is home a familiar street?* Nova (10)

In 'My Address', Nova puns on 'address' and opens up a connection between his speech and his sense of belonging. These are themes taken up by Breis (pronounced 'Breeze') in his book '**Brilliant Rappers Educate Intelligent Students?** (2011). The poem 'Wahala' is offered in 'pidgin English' with 'Interpretation' on the opposite page.

?Plan one thing, *na* another thing *selè*,

You never plan for that one *télètélè*

*Kiló se* The stress, palaver

Everyone I know has to deal with *wàhàlà*

?Plan one thing, and another thing happens

You never planned for that before

What's the matter? The stress, palaver

Everyone I know has to deal with trouble? (22-23)

Both Karl Nova and Breis lived in London and Nigeria during their childhood and explore in their writing how both places shaped them. Far from being imitative of hip-hop from the USA, their writing demonstrates a personal engagement with the spirit of hip-hop in drawing from diverse sources in order to create something original; by way of example, Breis writes of learning from Lauryn Hill, Roald Dahl and Ben Okri.

Two of the most highly rated rappers in Britain have provided words for picture books aimed at younger readers by illustrator Sav Akyüz. Akala's rhymes feature **Hip and Hop: You Can Do Anything** (2017) and Ben Bailey Smith (also known as Doc Brown) provides words for **I Am Bear** (2016). The latter has a link to a music video on the cover.

**Brilliant Rappers Educate Intelligent Students** is also available as an audiobook and **Hip Hop Speaks to Children** comes with a CD with performances of most of the poems and songs. This is a neat reversal of thirty years ago - when hip hop albums often included lyric sheets - and suggests that publishers are starting to recognise the value of words penned by MCs.

**Karen Sands-O'Connor** is professor of English at SUNY Buffalo State in New York. She has, as Leverhulme Visiting Professor at Newcastle University, worked with Seven Stories, the National Centre for the Children's Book, and has recently published *Children's Publishing and Black Britain 1965-2015* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

**Darren Chetty** is a teacher, doctoral researcher and writer with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children's literature and hip hop culture. He is a contributor to **The Good Immigrant**, edited by Nikesh Shukla and published by Unbound, and tweets at @rapclassroom.

**On The Come Up** (2019), Angie Thomas, Walker.

**Gangsta Rap** (2004) Benjamin Zephaniah

**Rhythm and Poetry** (2017) Karl Nova, Caboodle.

**Brilliant Rappers Educate Intelligent Students**. (2011), Breis, Student of Life.

**When The Beat Was Born: DJ Kool Herc and the Creation of Hip Hop** (2013) Laban Carrick Hill Illustrated by Theodore Taylor III. Roaring Brook.

**I Am Bear** (2016) Ben Bailey Smith and Sav Akyüz. Walker

**Hip And Hop: You Can Do Anything** (2017) Akala, Illustrated by Sav Akyüz. OUP

**Hip Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry with a Beat**, (2008) Nikki Giovanni (ed). Jabberwocky.

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