



Classroom Guide for
POEMS IN THE ATTIC
Written by **Nikki Grimes**
Illustrated by **Elizabeth Zunon**

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grades 4–5

Interest Level: Grades 1–6

Guided Reading Level: N

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.9/0.5

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Family, Intergenerational Relationships, Military Life, Concept of Home, Geography, Cultural Diversity, Poetry (Free Verse, Tanka)

Synopsis

During a visit to her grandma's house, a young girl discovers a box of poems in the attic, poems written by her mother when she was growing up. Reading through this treasure trove of poetry, the girl discovers her mother's special memories of a childhood spent moving around the world as the daughter of an Air Force captain. Over the years, her mother used poetry to record her experiences in the many places the family lived. Alaska, Colorado, Germany, Japan—these are just a few of the fascinating places the girl explores through her mother's eyes while realizing that Mama was once a kid too. Sharing these experiences also helps the girl feel closer to her mother than ever before. To let her mother know this, she creates a special gift: a book with her own poems and copies of her mother's. And when the girl returns her mother's poems to the box in the attic, she leaves her own poems too, for someone else to find, someday.

Using free verse for the young girl's poems and tanka for her mother's, master poet Nikki Grimes creates a tender intergenerational story that speaks to every child's need to hold onto special memories of home, no matter where that place might be.

BACKGROUND

From the Author:

Free verse poems are lines of poetry that have no set rules. The lines can be long or short, with as many, or as few, syllables as the poet chooses. The poet sets his or her own rhythm and decides whether to use rhyme, repetition, metaphor, or some other element of poetry. Free verse poetry can be the hardest of all forms because you have no set pattern to follow. You must make up your own rules as you go along, and those

rules must make sense. No matter what rhythm or rhyme you create, the poem should look and sound like a poem when you're done.

Tanka is an ancient poetry form, originally from Japan. The word *tanka*, as used here, means "short poem" in Japanese. The basic *tanka* is five lines long. The line-by-line syllable count varies in the modern English version, but the number of lines is always the same. Traditional *tanka* poems focus on mood. They are often about love, the four seasons, the shortness of life, or nature.

The modern form of *tanka* used for the poems in *Poems in the Attic* is as follows:

- line 1: 5 syllables
- line 2: 7 syllables
- line 3: 5 syllables
- line 4: 7 syllables
- line 5: 7 syllables

The United States Air Force (USAF): The USAF is the aerial warfare service branch of the United States Armed Forces and is one of three military departments of the Department of Defense. The mission of the US Air Force is to "fly, fight, and win . . . in air, space and cyberspace" ([The United States Air Force](#)).¹ There are more than 64 Air Force [bases](#) in the United States and more than 20 different locations in other countries.²

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strands 4–5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background knowledge and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. Take a look at the front cover. Take a picture walk. Ask students to make a prediction. Do you think this book will be fiction or nonfiction? What makes you think so? What clues do the author and illustrator give to help you know whether this book will be fiction or nonfiction?
2. What do you know about texts that are written in a poetry format? What are the typical text features of poetry? What are some things you might not find in a book written as a series of poems?
3. What are some reasons that people write poetry? Why do you think some authors write books using poetry? How do you think their reasons differ from authors who write prose?
4. What do you know about military families? Where do they live? What are some reasons why families may have to move often to new places and schools? Share a time your family or someone close to you had to move and how it made you feel.
5. Think about a special family member in your life (older sibling, grandparent, parent, aunt, uncle, or older cousin) and what the person was like as a child. What would you like to know about this person when they were your age? How are you similar to and/or different from that person?
6. Why do you think I chose this book for us to read today?

¹ <http://www.airforce.com/learn-about/our-mission/>

² <http://www.airforce.com/contact-us/base-locator/>

Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1, Craft & Structure, Strand 5, and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

Read and talk about the title of the book. Ask students what they think the title, *Poems in the Attic*, means. Then ask them what and who they think this book will most likely be about. What situations might be talked about in the text? What do you think might happen? What information do you think you might learn? What makes you think that?

Have students observe the dual illustration tracks that run through the majority of the story: the main illustrations of the narrator in the oval on the left side of the spread and the “flashback” illustrations of the narrator’s mother on the right side of the spread. Ask students why they think the author and illustrator decided to structure the book and story this way.

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: front cover, endpapers, dedications, acknowledgments, title page, illustrations, author’s note, and information about United States Air Force bases and poetry forms.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

Have students read to find out about:

- challenges and advantages of growing up in a military family
- free verse and tanka forms of poetry used for storytelling
- how the mother (as a young girl) adapted to the challenges and environments she faced as a child of a military serviceperson
- how the narrator shows understanding about her mother’s childhood
- the different locations around the United States and the world where the girl’s mother lived
- to what the book title, *Poems in the Attic*, refers

Encourage students to consider why the author, Nikki Grimes, would want to share this story with young people.

VOCABULARY

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students’ prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below. Encourage a variety of strategies to support students’ vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

CONTENT SPECIFIC

Grunion Run	(on) leave	squid-on-a-stick	candleholders	dune
kayaks	canoes	Aurora Borealis	Air Force Brat	heron
chopsticks	kimono	cherry blossoms	dragonflies	bay
bird-breeding box	Hohenecken	Rhinoceros beetles	Garden of the Gods	
Mount Fuji	<i>tanka</i> (short poem)	<i>luminarias</i> (paper candleholder)		

ACADEMIC

stacked	imagined	flitting	rememberings	wiggling
ashore	slim	breathless	shimmy	'cross (across)

scalloped	bloomed	scaled	tumbling	strapped
shuffled	clutched	clamber	atop	wonders
mist	soar	cease	dusted	commanded
dizzy	bow	strolling	flings	stitch
countless	unwrap	tackle		

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite evidence with their answers.**

Literal Comprehension

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3 and Craft & Structure, Strand 4)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strand 4)

1. From what point of view or perspective is this story told? How do you know?
2. What poetry forms are used to tell the story?
3. How can the reader differentiate between the young girl's and her mother's poems?
4. What is an example of a verse, or stanza, in the book? What is an example of a line in a verse?
5. Find and list two to three examples of similes and metaphors in this book. What images do these words and phrases bring to mind?
6. List all the descriptive verbs, adjectives, and adverbs that the author, Nikki Grimes, uses to describe the young girl's and her mother's experiences.
7. What is an "Air Force brat?" Who is considered an Air Force brat in the story?
8. Why does the girl's mother spend her childhood moving around the United States and different parts of the world?
9. Why does the girl's mother only bring a photo of her father to "Bring Your Dad Day?" Where is he? She says she "clutched" her photo, "wishing." For what was she wishing?
10. Why is the girl in the story staying at her Grandma's house? Where is her mother? By the end of the story, how long has it been since she has seen her mother?
11. Name and list the different locations where the girl's mother has visited or lived.
12. Select one of the tanka poems in the book and identify the line and syllable count that the author, Nikki Grimes, followed.
13. Select one of the verses/stanzas in a poem and focus on the descriptive words or phrases. What descriptive words are used? How do those words make you feel? What images do they bring to mind?
14. How old was the girl's mother when she began writing poems? How old is the girl in the story?
15. Why does the girl want to "play Queen, like Mama?" What inspires her?
16. Find two to three examples of how her mother's poems inspire the girl.
17. What does the phrase "clamber atop it" mean?
18. What surprise does the girl have for her mother when she comes home? What does the girl leave in the attic?
19. Why does the girl's grandfather promise her mother that they will see the Air Force One "countless times?"

Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1 and 3, Craft & Structure, Strands 4–6, and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

1. What does the verse “a childhood on wings,/flitting from place to place” mean? To what is the author, Nikki Grimes, comparing the mother’s childhood? Why is this an appropriate metaphor for this story?
2. How are memories “like sandcastles/the waves wash away?”
3. What does the girl mean when she says her mother “glued her memories with words?”
4. How do you think the girl’s mother felt moving from place to place? What do you think is difficult and exciting about living in different places?
5. Similar to the girl’s mother in the story, families in which a parent serves in the military often need to move. Where do you think they consider home to be? When do they feel at home?
6. The girl says that her mother talks about nature and “the wonders of the woods.” To what “wonders” do you think she is referring?
7. Why do you think the girl’s mother started writing her memories through poetry? How do you think writing poetry helped her mother during her childhood?
8. Compare and contrast the experiences described in the girl’s poems and her mother’s poems. How are their experiences similar and different?
9. How do the author, Nikki Grimes, and the illustrator, Elizabeth Zunon, differentiate between the girl’s poems and her mother’s poems? How are they both alike and different? How do the author and illustrator distinguish between past and present?
10. How do the girl’s poems mirror her mother’s poems? Select a spread from the book and describe how the girl’s poem on the left mirrors her mother’s poem on the right. What does this suggest about the relationship between the past and present?
11. Select one of the poems in the book to analyze. What poetry form was used? What is the central theme? What poetic devices are used? What imagery is created? How is the poem’s title significant to the content of the poem?
12. Do you think the girl admires her mother? Why or why not?
13. What do you think the girl realizes and learns about her mother as she reads her mother’s poems?
14. Compare and contrast the girl’s childhood to her mother’s. How are they similar? How are they different?
15. How do you think the girl’s mother reacted when she received her daughter’s poems as a gift?
16. Do you think the girl’s mother wants her daughter to experience a childhood similar to the military brat lifestyle she had? Why or why not?
17. Why do you think the author, Nikki Grimes, chose the United States Air Force as the military branch for this story? Do you think this story could apply to any branch of the military? Why or why not?
18. Although this story focuses on the moving lifestyles that military families face, do you think readers from nonmilitary families can relate to this story? Why or why not?

Reader’s Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1 and 2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strand 1 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader’s response journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. The girl's mother chose to preserve her memories in poetry and to keep her poems in a cedar box. How do you preserve your memories? Where do you keep your "rememberings?"
2. By reading her mother's poems, the girl gains a greater understanding of her mother. Describe an experience that helped you better understand something about yourself or your family.
3. The girl's mother had a "childhood on wings" and moved to many different places. Have you ever had to move to a new city, state, or country? Share a time you or someone close to you had to move to someplace new. How did you feel? What was exciting? What was difficult?
4. If you could visit one place featured in the book, which would you choose? Why?
5. The girl's mother lived in different places across the United States and in other countries. Have you ever visited or lived in a distant place or country? How does the environment, climate, or culture compare to where you currently live?
6. The girl hasn't seen her mother in three days and the mother's father was gone for months on leave throughout her childhood. Have you ever had to spend time away from your family or a loved one? How did you feel? How did you cope with your feelings?

ELL/ESL Teaching Strategies

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the book with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader.
2. Have each student write three questions about the text. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
 - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.
 - Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the book or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about what the concept of home means to them or which poem in the book was their favorite.
5. The story contains some content-specific words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Students who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

Science/STEM

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9 and Range of Reading & Level of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–5)

1. When the girl's mother moves to Cabrillo Beach, she goes to a [grunion run](#).³ Have students research and illustrate the life cycle of a grunion with informative captions describing what is happening at each stage.
2. Have students explore the Aurora Borealis, or Northern Lights, with this [video](#) from National Geographic, and then research what causes this natural phenomenon in the sky.⁴ Where and when can you see the Northern Lights? What causes these bright lights?

Social Studies/Geography

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1 and 2, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. Review the information about the United States Air Force Bases in the back of the book and have students pick one of the places featured to research further. In what state, country, and continent is the place located? Describe the climate, geography, and culture. What significance or relevance does the corresponding poem have to this location?
2. Provide students with copies of a world map. (An outline of a Robinson projection world map can be downloaded [here](#) for reproduction.⁵) Ask students to mark on the map the location of each place featured in the book, plus the Air Force bases. Also have students identify and label the seven continents, five major oceans, their home location on the map. Discuss what a compass rose is and the purpose it serves on a map. Students may also build their own maps at [National Geographic Education's MapMaker 1-Page Maps](#).⁶
3. Have students research the history and origin of Japanese tanka. Using their research, ask them to create a timeline depicting the evolution of tanka poetry until the development of the haiku. Who were/are some famous or influential tanka poets? Using the author's guidelines at the end of the book, encourage students to try writing a poem using the tanka form.

English Language Arts/Writing

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9)

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9)

1. Ask students to make a chart with a column for the following poetic devices: simile, metaphor, personification, assonance, and rhythm. Review or teach what each of these literary devices is and its purpose, using examples from the book or other sources. Then have students find an example of each poetic device in *Poems in the Attic* and record the examples on the chart. For definitions of the literary devices, check out [Literarydevices.net](#).⁷

³ <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Fishing/Ocean/Grunion#28425746-introduction>

⁴ <http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/short-film-showcase/brilliant-time-lapse-of-alaskas-northern-lights>

⁵ <http://www.worksheetworks.com/geography/world/robinson.html>

⁶ http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/map/?ar_a=3&map_types=55

⁷ <http://literarydevices.net/>

2. In a t-chart, have students study and compare free verse and tanka poetry forms. What traditional format, rules, or pattern does each form follow? What poetic devices are used? For what is it often used? List and identify some well-known free verse and tanka poems and their poets.
3. Ask students to write a free verse or tanka poem about what home means to them. Suggest to students that they describe a specific memory or experience of their homes in their poems. If appropriate, have students create or bring in pictures to accompany their poems and then present their poems to the class.
4. Encourage students to keep a poetry diary for a month, and have them write two or more free verse and/or tanka poems each week. Their poems may be about important people, places, and/or things or everyday events in their lives. Encourage students to use descriptive adjectives, verbs, and adverbs as well as other literary techniques (simile, metaphor, personification, assonance, and rhythm). Each poem may be written or typed on a separate piece of paper and stapled together with a cover to create a personal book of poems.
5. Provide students with a Venn Diagram and samples of haiku poems to compare to and contrast with the tanka poems in this book. How are haiku and tanka poems similar? How are they different? What is the origin of each type of poetry? What is the traditional subject matter for each type of poetry? Encourage students to write their own haiku and tanka poems and reflect on the writing process for each form. Which do students prefer? Why?
6. Have students practice writing poetry with the [All Together Now: Collaborations in Poetry Writing](#)⁸ and [Can You Haiku?](#)⁹ lesson plans from EDSITEMent.
7. Have students write a journal entry from the point of view of the girl's mother after her first move to a new place. Ask them to select one of the locations depicted in the poems and imagine how the girl's mother felt moving to a new place for the first time. About what was she excited or nervous? What was difficult about the move? What was positive about her experience?
8. Ask students to write either a thank-you note or a poem (free verse or tanka) to active duty or veteran service men and women of the United States military. With a parent or guardian, students may check out organizations such as [Operation Gratitude](#),¹⁰ [A Million Thanks](#),¹¹ or other military support organizations for information about where to send letters.
9. Have students write a letter to the author, Nikki Grimes, recommending another location near another Air Force Base that she could feature in the book. Students should make a case as to why their place should be in the book and how it adds to the story.
10. Have students read [Cool Melons—Turn to Frogs! The Life and Poems of Issa](#)¹² and [Water Rolls, Water Rises](#),¹³ which are poetry texts. As students reflect on each story, ask them to compare and contrast the forms of poetry in each book and how poetry is used to tell a story. What is the central idea of each book? What form of poetry is used in each book? How do these books compare to *Poems in the Attic*?
11. Have students read the author's note in the back of the book. What aspects of her life did the author, Nikki Grimes, use as inspiration for the story? How do you think

⁸ <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/all-together-now-collaborations-poetry-writing#sect-introduction>

⁹ <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/can-you-haiku>

¹⁰ <https://www.operationgratitude.com/writeletters/>

¹¹ http://www.amillionthanks.org/send_a_letter.php

¹² <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2379>

¹³ <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2865>

the mother's childhood experiences growing up were similar to the author's? How were they different?

Art/Media

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3)

1. Provide students with colorful sand, clear jars or bottles with lids, and funnels. Just like the girl in the poem entitled "Who Is She?" have students create their own sand art, alternating different colors of sand in their jars.
2. Have students create and decorate their own paper candleholders, or *luminarias*, like the girl and her mother do in the story. Give each student a brown paper bag, scissors, paint, and art decorating supplies. Using scissors, scallop the tops of the opening of the brown paper bags. Then have students decorate their paper candleholders. When finished, place secure candles or flameless candles in each bag. Additional directions can be found [here](#)¹⁴ and [here](#).¹⁵
3. Have students create their own Northern Lights with the [Exploring Northern Lights with Kids Through Art and Music](#) from The Educator's Spin On It.¹⁶

Home-School Connection

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strand 7)

1. Encourage children of military families to explore the nonprofit organization [United Through Reading](#), which is a free service that records service members reading a book to their children.¹⁷ A DVD of the recording is then sent to the service member's family.
2. Explore the [Talk, Listen, Connect](#) program from Sesame Workshop to guide and support young children through the deployment of a parent.¹⁸
3. Ask students to interview their parents, grandparents, or guardians about their childhoods. In what year were you (student's age)? What was it like for you growing up? Where did you live? With whom did you live? Did you ever move or travel? What were some of your favorite activities and hobbies? What does home mean to you? Have students write down their interviewee's answers to bring to class. Ask students to reflect on these answers and write about what they learned from the interview.
4. Have students write three or more pairs of poems with a parent or guardian. The student and adult will agree on a subject to write about for each pair of poems and then write his or her own poem in the desired poetry form. Each poem should be written and illustrated on a separate piece of paper. Bind or staple the completed poems together with a front and back cover to share with the class.

¹⁴ <http://www.doityourself.com/stry/make-holiday-luminaries#b>

¹⁵ <http://www.wikihow.com/Make-Luminaries>

¹⁶ <http://www.theeducatorsspinonit.com/2012/04/exploring-northern-lights-with-kids.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.unitedthroughreading.org/>

¹⁸ <http://www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/our-initiatives/military-families/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nikki Grimes, bestselling author of numerous books for young people, is noted for the poetry that appears in both her picture books and novels. Her work has been honored six times by the Coretta Scott King Award, most recently in 2014. Additional honors for her books include ALA Notables, Bank Street College's Best Children's Books of the Year, and Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People. Grimes lives in Corona, California. Visit her website at <http://www.nikkigrimes.com/>.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Elizabeth Zunon earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design in 2006, and since then she has been illustrating books, as well as making jewelry and handbags. Zunon grew up in Ivory Coast, West Africa, but now lives in Albany, New York. Visit her website at <http://lizzunon.com/>.

Book Information

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*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Interest Level: Grades 1–6

Guided Reading Level: N

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.9/0.5

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RESOURCES ON THE WEB:

Learn more about *Poems in the Attic* at <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2881>

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