

# Taking the Unexpected Detour:



*How Connecting with Teens Changed my Life... and Theirs*



CONNECT







**Stranger than fiction**

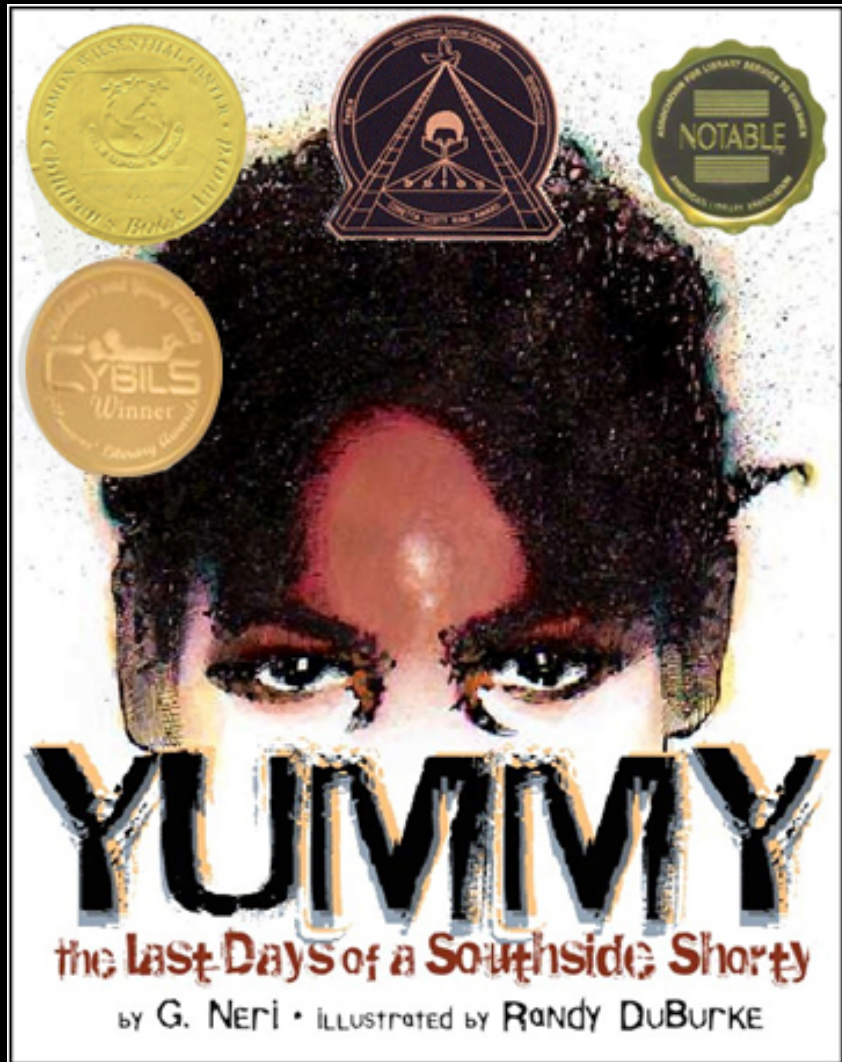
a novel by  
**G. NERI**



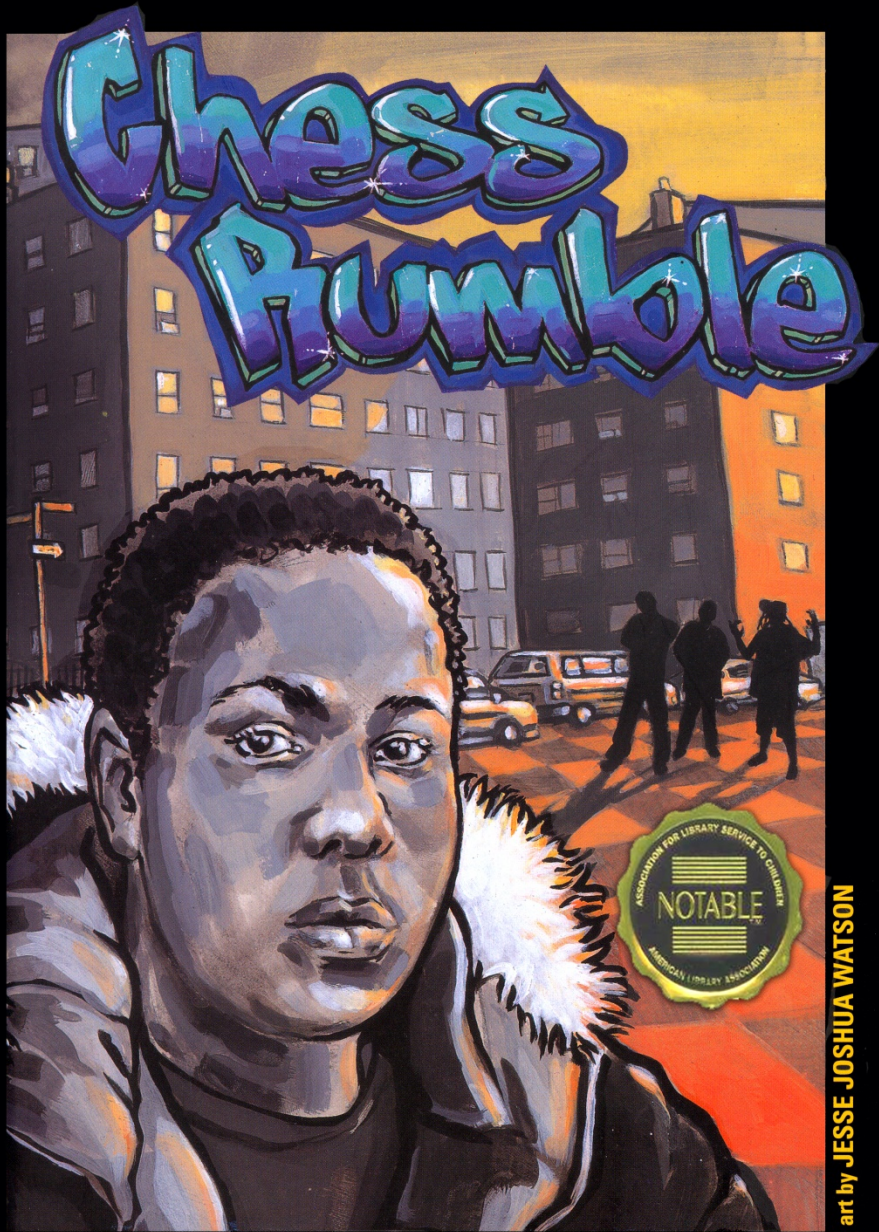
# GHETTO COWBOY

illustrated by **JESSE JOSHUA WATSON**









by G. NERI

art by JESSE JOSHUA WATSON



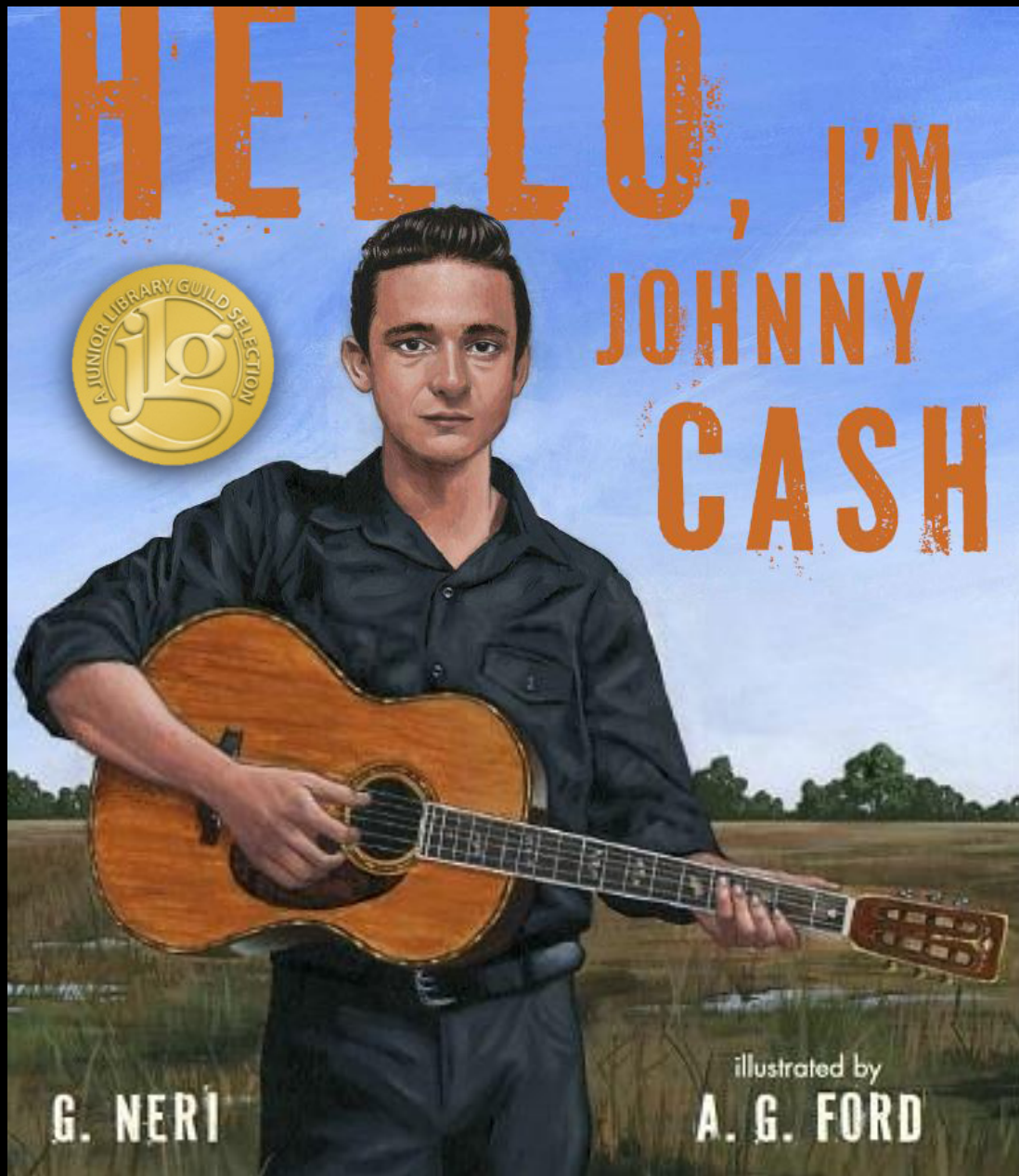
★ "Harsh and relentless, a tough but worthy read."  
—starred, *Kirkus Reviews*

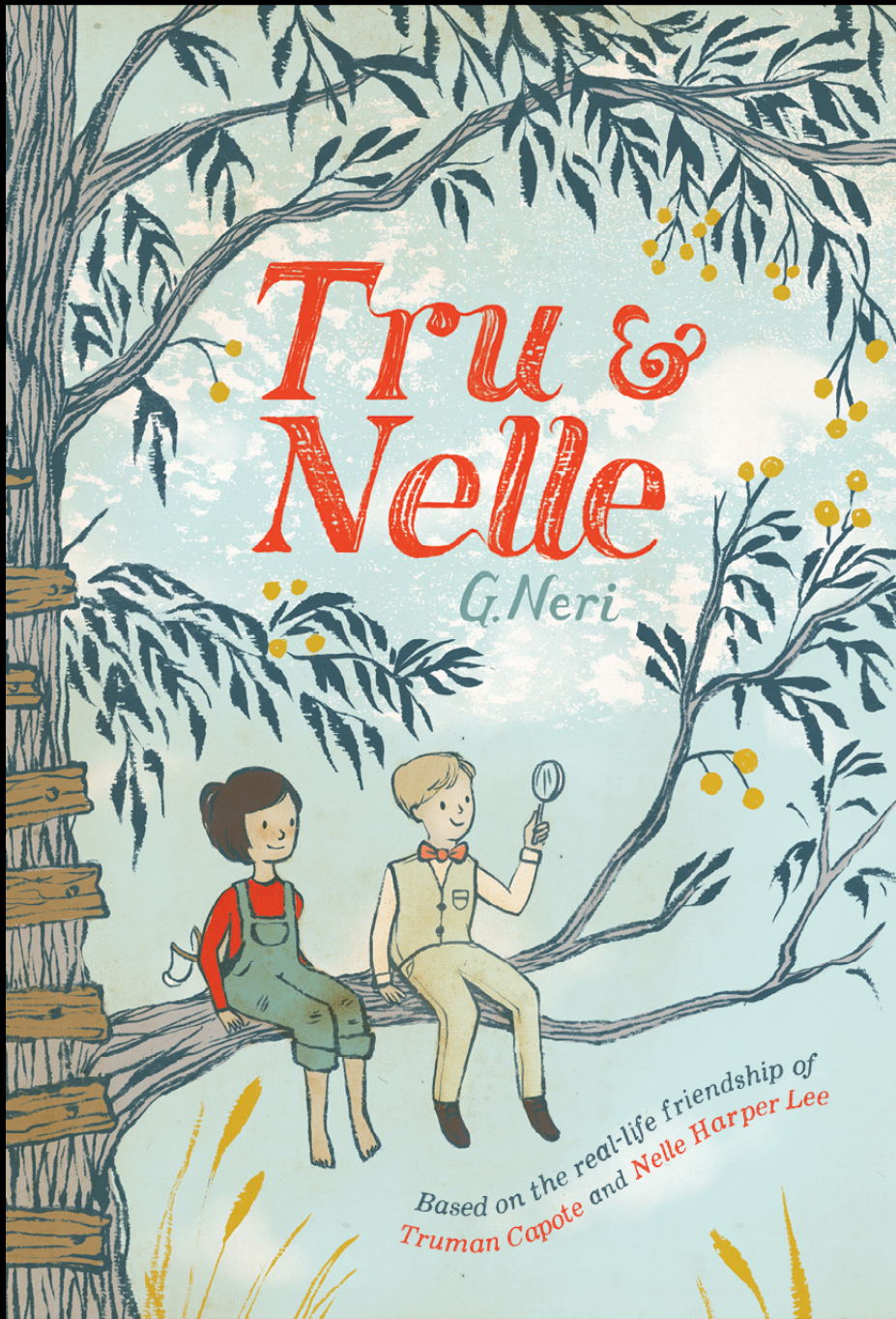
# KNOCK OUT GAMES

G. NERI



**"KNOCKOUT" ATTACKS  
TERRIFYING NEW "GAME" SWEEPING NATION**

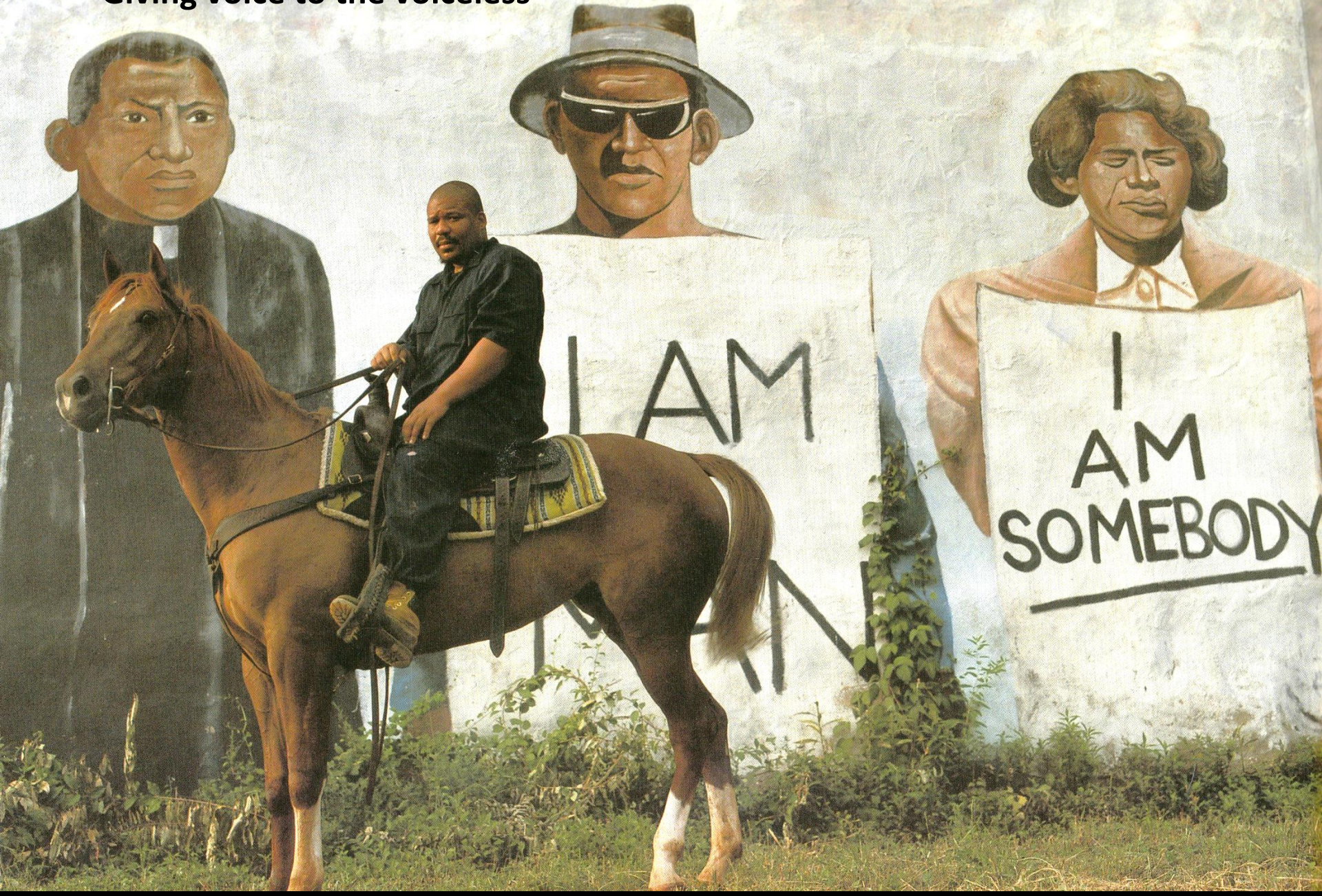




Real issues for real teens



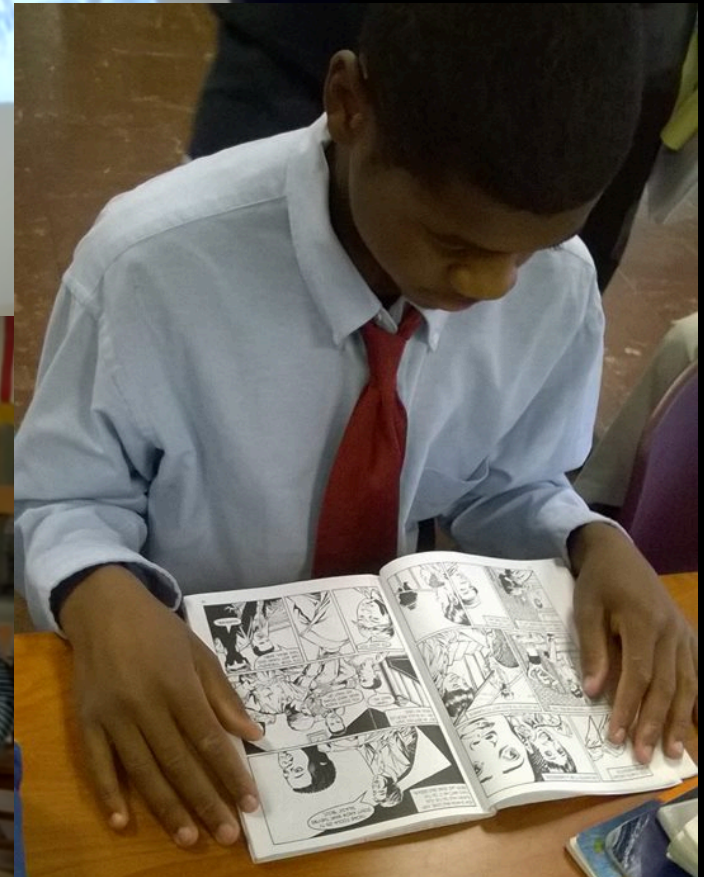
**Giving voice to the voiceless**



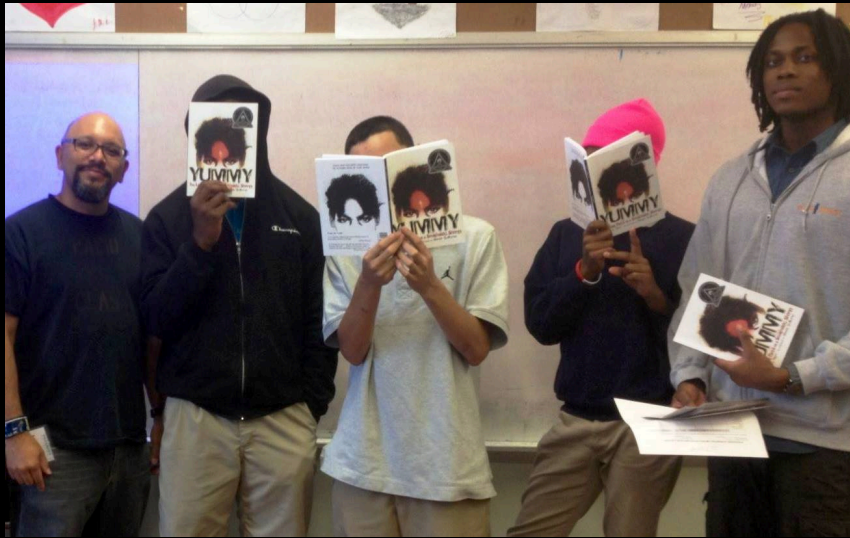
# Opening eyes beyond the headlines



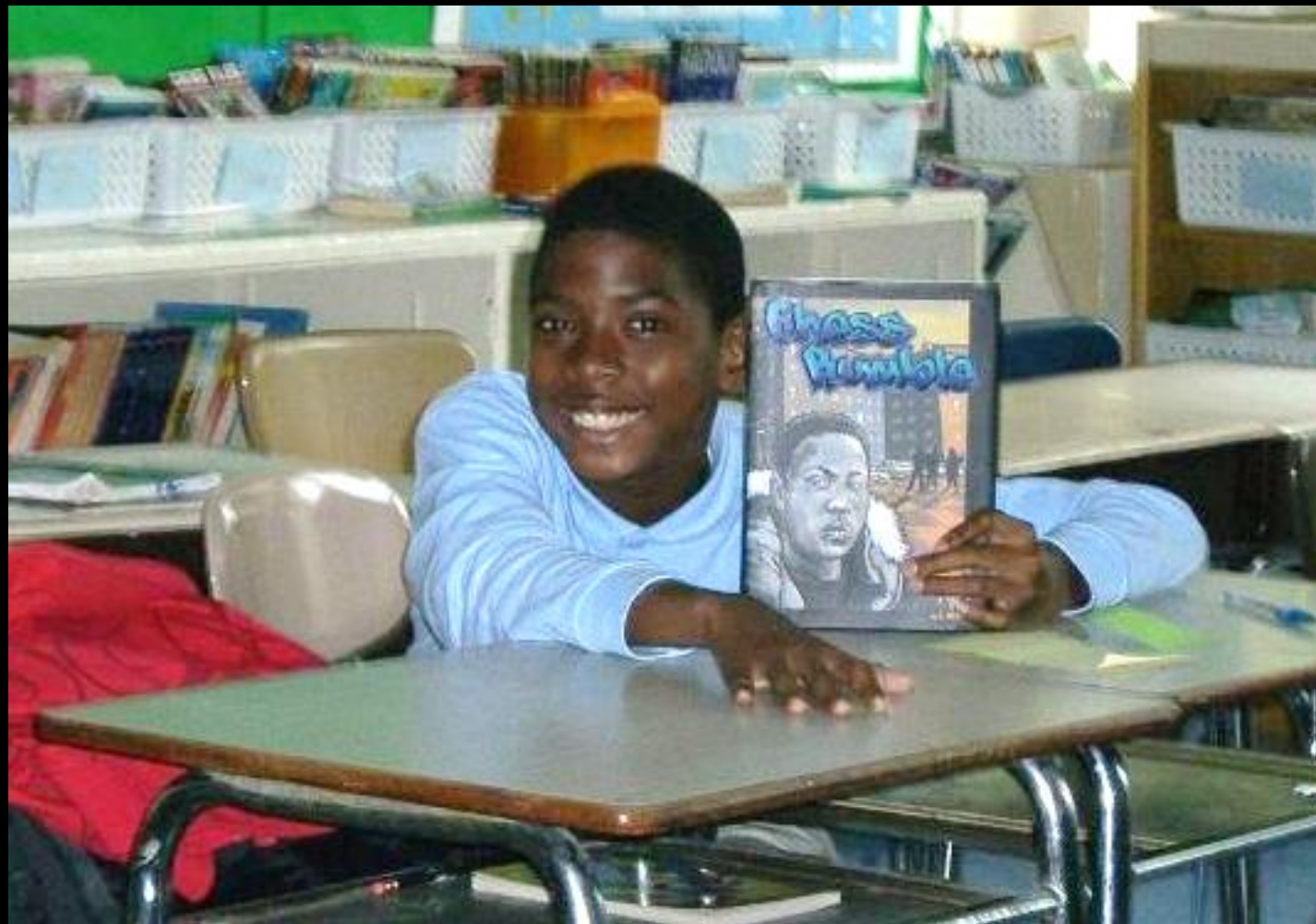
# Sharing to learn



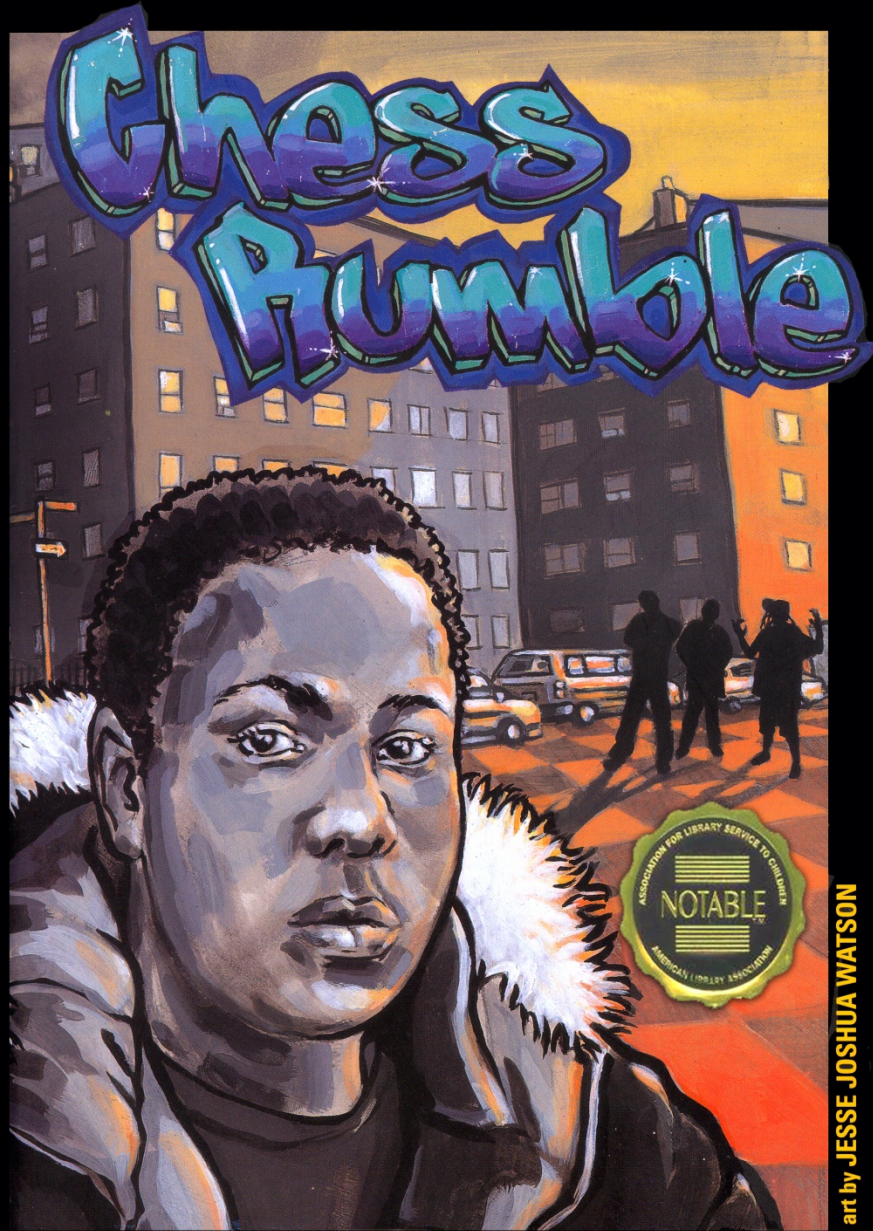
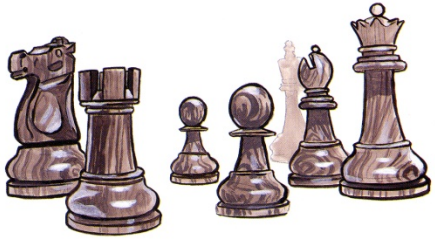




# Raequon



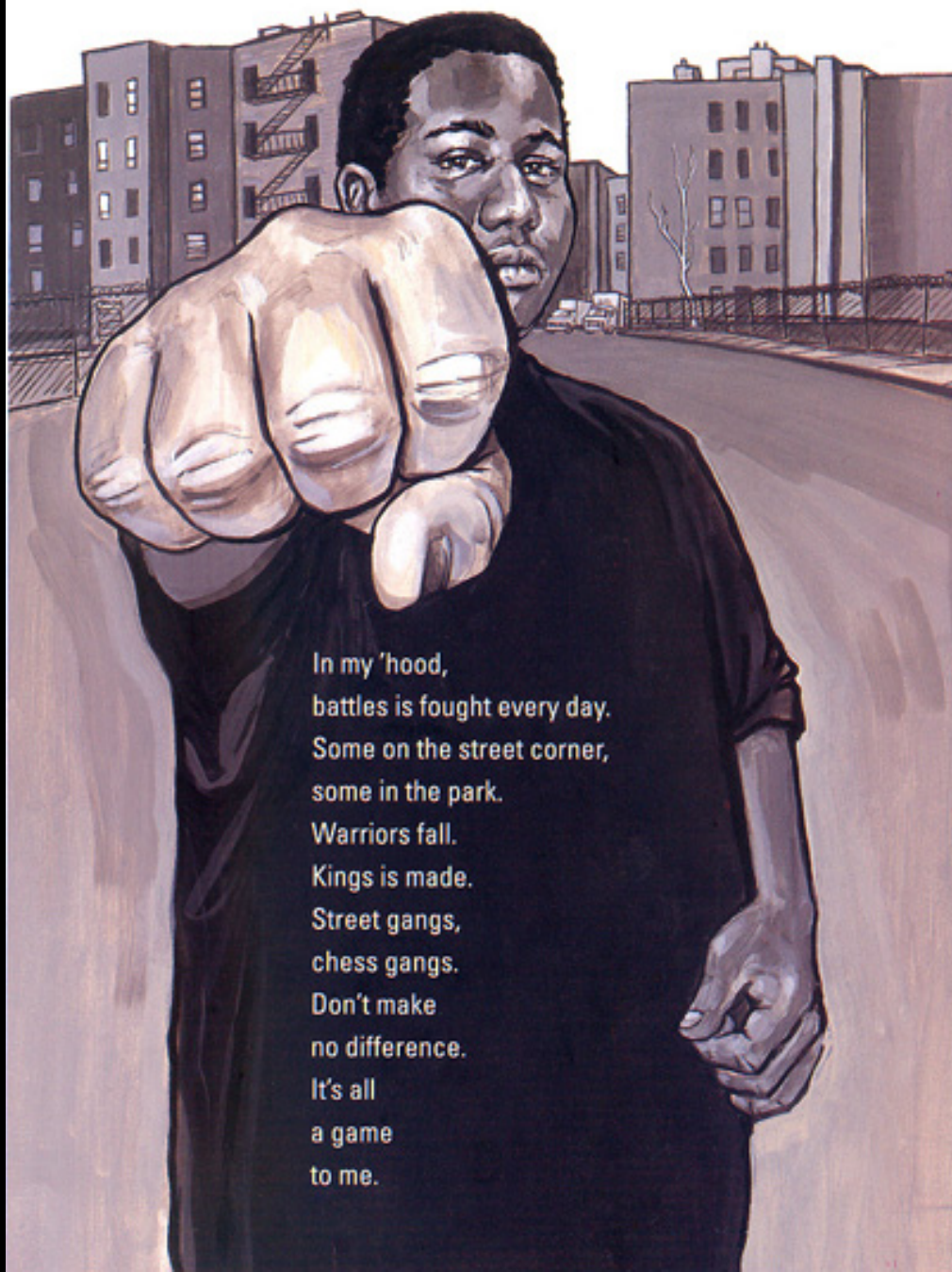
If you can reach one person...



art by JESSE JOSHUA WATSON

by G. NERI





In my 'hood,  
battles is fought every day.  
Some on the street corner,  
some in the park.  
Warriors fall.  
Kings is made.  
Street gangs,  
chess gangs.  
Don't make  
no difference.  
It's all  
a game  
to me.

# FICTION



# The Author, the Librarian, and the Poet

How author G. Neri and a Tampa school librarian helped turn a young at-risk nonreader into a Shakespeare-loving poet

## G. Neri The Author

In 2009, Kim DeFusco, the media specialist at Young Middle Magnet school here in Tampa, invited me to come to her school to give a talk. She told me about one particular student, Raequon, who loved my first book, *Chess Rumble* (Lee & Low, 2007), a free-verse graphic novella about a troubled boy whose life is turned around by the game of chess. Raequon was dying to meet me. But like many kids in his situation, come the day of my visit, he was not to be found.

"He's been suspended," Kim said, as if it were a common occurrence. It was. She was such a believer in

this kid, though, that she kept sending me updates about him because my books seemed to be having such an impact on his life.

I've been lucky to hear stories like this from librarians and teachers all over the country. Many times, I've even seen firsthand my books help turn nonreaders into readers. Literally. I've seen boys in the back of the room who've never read a book in their lives pick up one of mine (usually illustrated by the bold art of Jesse Watson or Randy DuBurke), and by the end of the day, I hear from the librarian something like, "Remember that disruptive kid in the back? He just finished your book."

That kind of reaction means a lot to me. It happened to me back when I was one of those kids in fifth grade. I was a visual person who loved to draw, but once pictures were no longer part of the books I was seeing, text became a wall I could not overcome.

That is, until my teacher put *The Phantom Tollbooth* (Random, 1961) in my hands, and my whole idea of what a book was went out the window. It was a revelation. That teacher had recognized who I was and matched me with a book that would speak to me. That was the start of a long, powerful journey into reading, and eventually, writing.



It's this triangle of change between author, librarian/teacher, and student that affects so many young lives. I've always believed that for every nonreader, there is a book just waiting to be discovered. Often, it's a teacher or librarian who facilitates that match-up.

For me, a book without a facilitator is just a quaint collection of words gathering dust on a shelf. For many kids I meet, a book only falls into their hands because a librarian or teacher made the connection. For some, these books mean so much, they want to keep them. Sustenance comes in many forms. If you're hungry, you might steal food. If you're hungry for something that speaks to you, it might be a book you hold precious. I understand that hunger.

Among the librarians and kids I've met, Kim's relationship to Raequon stood out. Here's why.

## Kimberly DeFusco The Librarian

I FIRST MET RAEQUON in 2009 when he came into our grade six intensive reading class. He was a very vocal nonreader, often a distraction to other students, and a behavioral handful. One day, I brought Raequon back to my office to talk about his behavior. I became agitated because he was looking at the wall and not paying any attention. "Is there something up there more interesting than listening to me?" I asked harshly.

He was looking at a picture of me posing with [Greg Neri] during one of Greg's visits to our school. He asked, "Isn't that G. Neri?"

I told him that it was. He was so excited to see I had a picture taken with G. Neri that he began telling me how much he loved

*Chess Rumble* and that he'd read it over and over throughout fifth grade. All of a sudden, it was like I was talking to a completely different Raequon. He lit up, talking about how he related to the character Marcus and how he was jealous of me for having met G. Neri.

Over the next couple years, Raequon continued to be a very vocal nonreader during class, but would also come to the library on his own and ask for books, hiding them in his binder or bag and never bringing them out in class.

When I convinced him to read *You Hear Me? Poems and Writings by Teenage Boys*, edited by Betsy Franco (Candlewick, 2000), he became obsessed with poetry. He was constantly



PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDWARD LINSMIER

www.sj.com

Hundreds of Raequons

This is the  
first copy of  
this book  
EVER  
signed.  
Thanks  
Bryan!  
*[Signature]*

HELLO, I'M  
DANNY

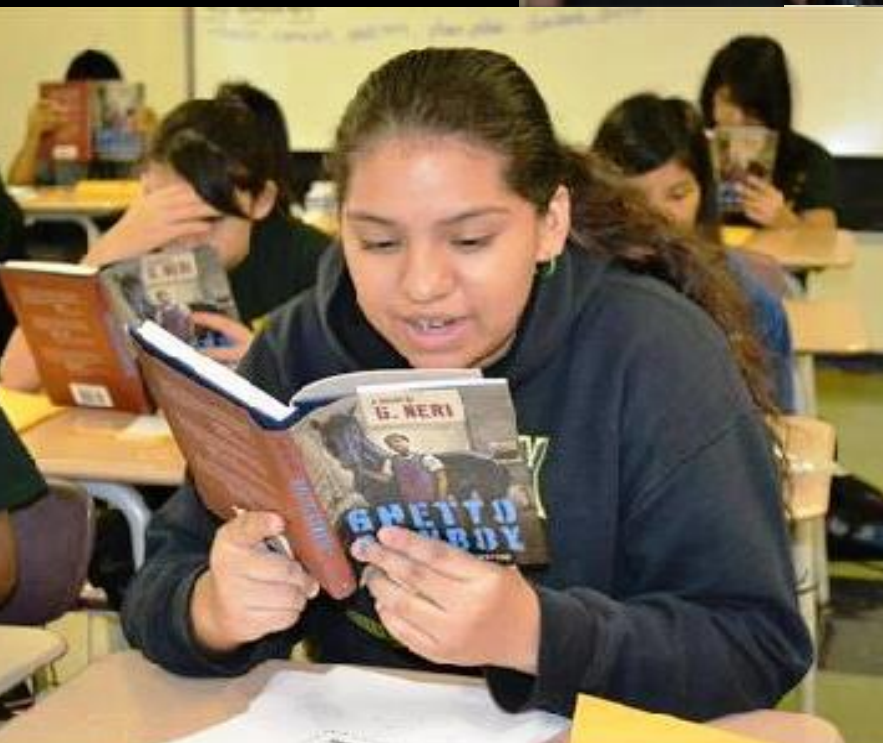
Being represented

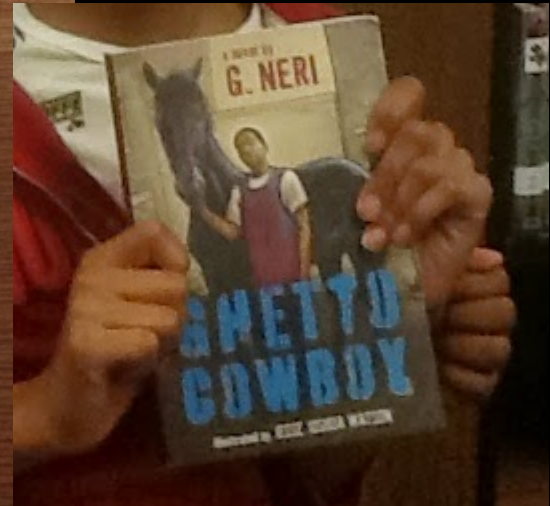
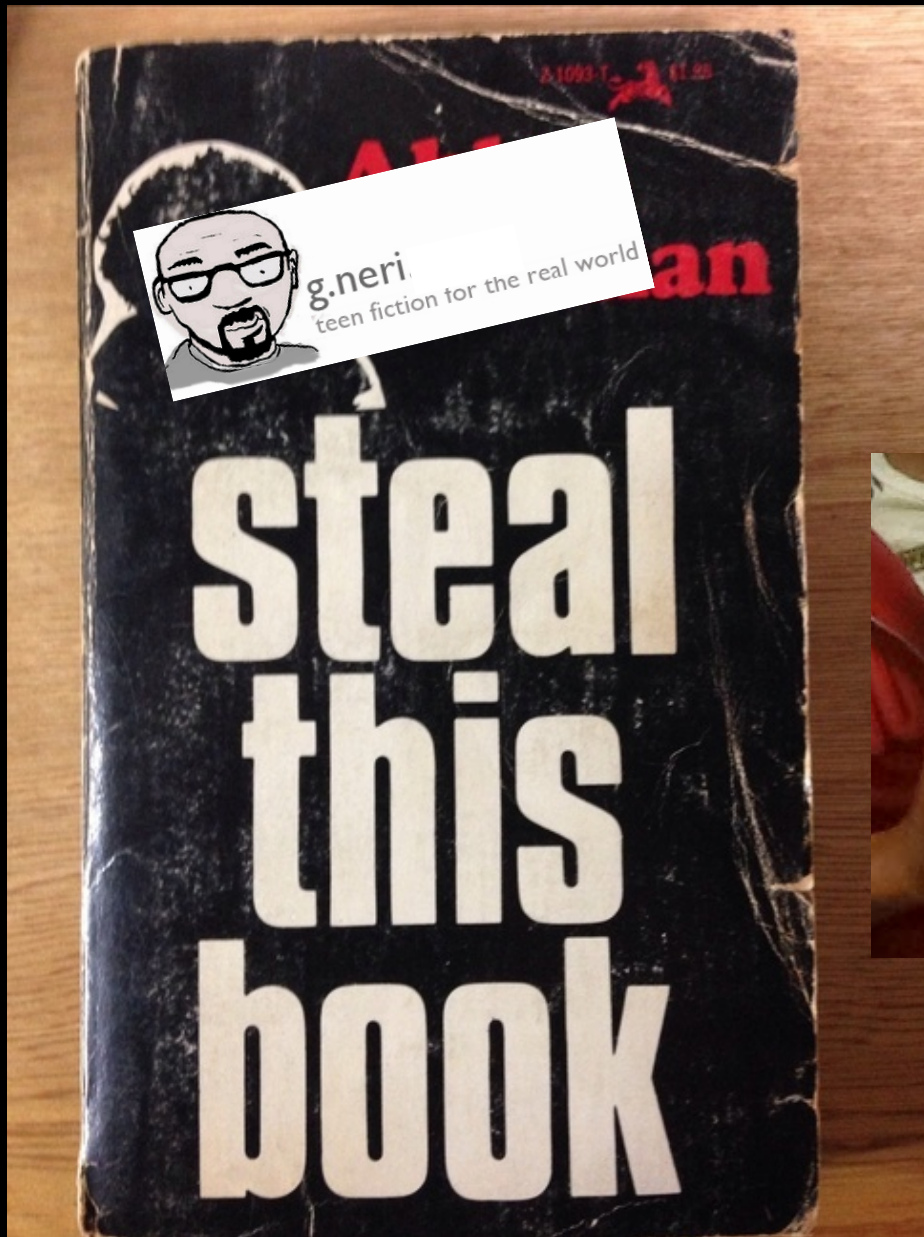






One school/ one book













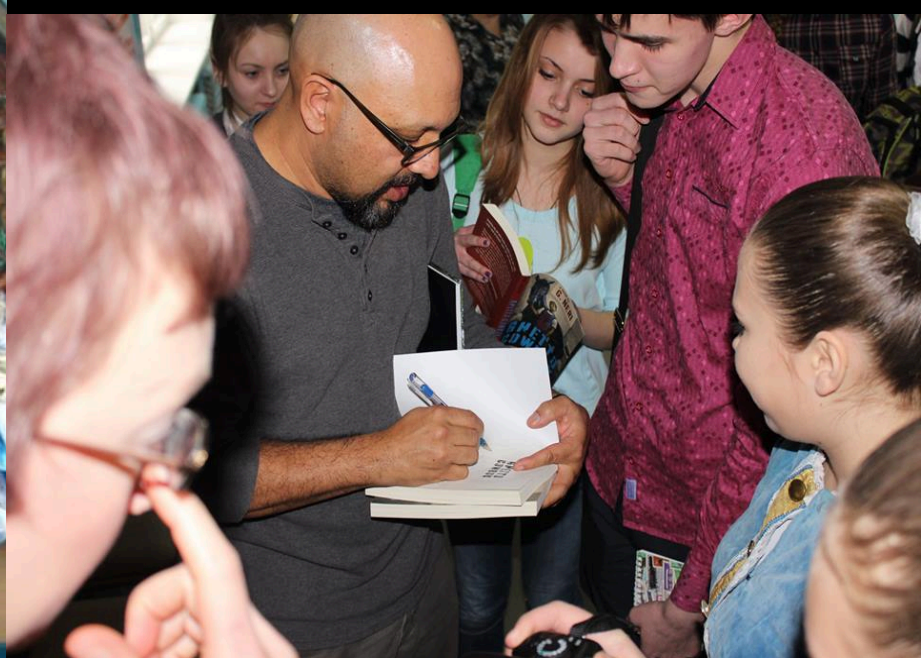
# City of Magnificent Intentions



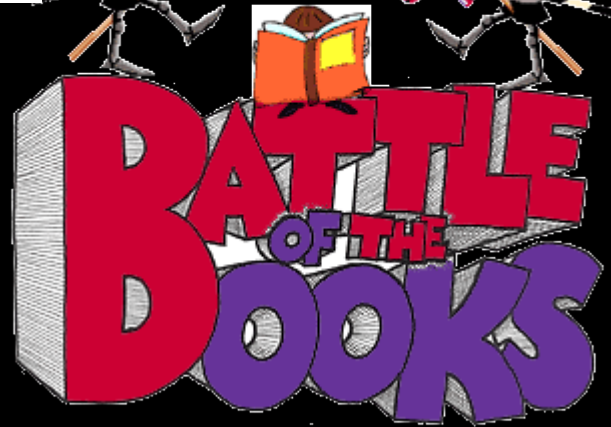


**HET!**





# BATTLE OF THE BOOKS



Book



Book Club

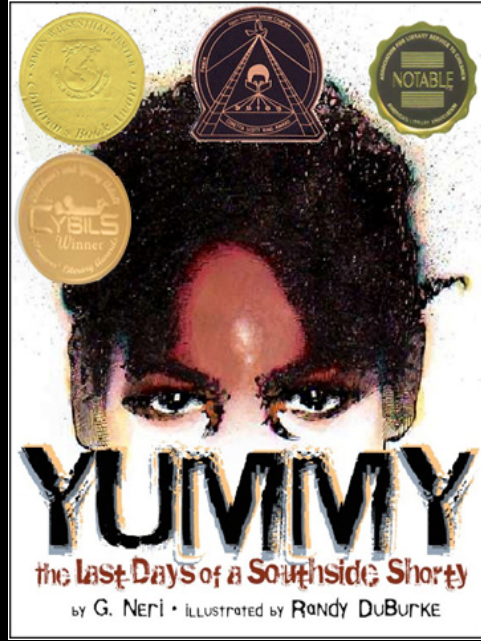
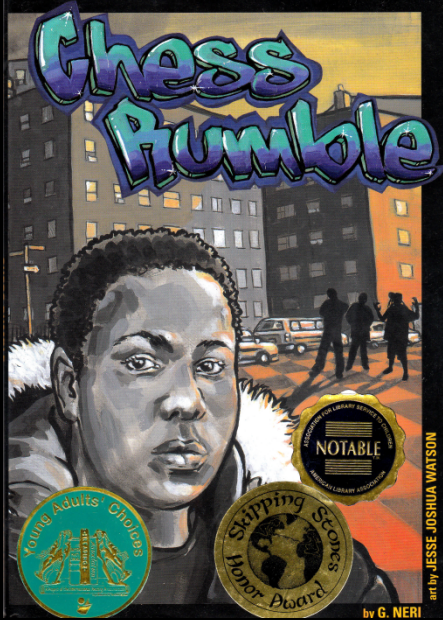




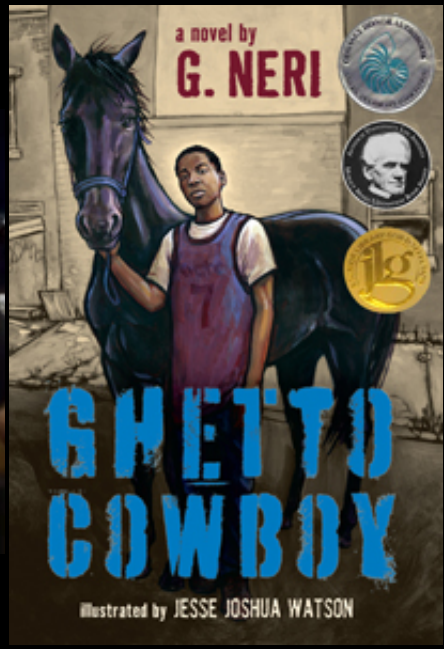
Weapons of mass information

CONNECT





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G. NERI



