

# ELIZABETH ACEVEDO

## Shares Her Heart, Teacher to Teacher



**Elizabeth Acevedo** is a poet, teacher, and celebrated spoken-word performer. Her powerful debut novel, *The Poet X*, uses verse to tell the coming-of-age story of teen Xiomara Batista.

Wondering if you can book Acevedo for a K-12 school visit? Yes, she loves discussing the writing process and literature with young people! For details, see the Contact page on her website at [www.acevedowrites.com/contact](http://www.acevedowrites.com/contact)



### What is it about spoken-word and performance poetry that has drawn you?

I love that once you've memorized a poem you can carry it in your body; you don't need any other materials or equipment to bring forth empowering words or a moving story, because you are already harboring everything you need.

Growing up in a tough neighborhood where my community experienced a lot of loss (young people killed through gang violence, young men incarcerated for years for petty violations, the removal of our flags from our windows and our cultural heritage slowly whitewashed to make way for the Columbia University kids, etc.), I think it was important for me as a young person to have something that could not be lost or taken from me: my own words engraved in memory.

### Are you surprised at the recognition you're receiving for your performances, poetry videos, and TED Talks?

The virality of certain poems certainly surprised me, especially at first. I don't think one every really knows what is going to be the perfect mix of timing and messaging that will find traction online, and so I was caught unawares when poems that had quietly existed for years all of sudden reached a wide audience. It's taught me that one can't predict popularity, so it doesn't make sense to take that into account

when writing. Instead, I write my heart and trust that my readership or audience will join me in the conversation.

### Can you share a little about your book, *The Poet X*?

*The Poet X* is about a young woman, Xiomara Batista, learning how to take up space in the world. She's been implicitly and explicitly told to be quiet, to be small, to fade into the background, but through a love of poetry and a poetry club at school she begins speaking up and taking center stage in her own life.

*The Poet X* is my first published novel, but it's actually the third book I've written. I struggled to figure out the central conflict, but once I knew what the heart of the book was, I was able to write it fairly quickly.

### What have you heard about the impact of your work on teachers and students, and how does feedback influence your writing?

Now that the book is out, I'm getting so many love notes on social media and through email, and they just warm me right up! I am so appreciative of teachers who read the book and then contact me, letting me know they are going to purchase a class set. I am moved when young people tag me in pictures saying that this is a

book that helps them feel seen—and it's been across racial and gender lines.

I began writing this novel because I was an eighth-grade ELA teacher in Prince George's County, Maryland, and I wanted to create something tangible my students could hold. So to know that other teachers and students are not just holding this book in their hands but holding it close in their hearts . . . it amazes me.

### What would you say to aspiring young poets?

1. Keep writing. Keep reading.
2. Keep writing. Keep reading.
3. Keep writing. Keep reading.
4. Find readers of your work whose feedback you trust to make your work clearer and more precise.
5. Don't worry about sounding like anyone else; pursue your singular voice. That unique voice is what will connect most with an audience once you begin putting your work into the world.

### Xiomara of *The Poet X* has such an engaging and powerful voice. Do you believe her influence on us (readers) is more powerful as a result of coming to us in poetry rather than prose?

I think when you have a character that is tough on the outside and perceived as one-dimensional by the people around her, it's powerful to show contrast of that imagery through verse, which inherently requires imagery and rhythm that add layers to her voice. Not to mention, so much of the novel is about finding one's voice, and having written a poet as the main character, I wanted readers to know exactly what her voice sounded like.

### What's one piece of advice you'd offer to teachers who want to inspire their students to write?

Give your students multiple examples of what effective writing looks like. Just like the right book can make a student a reader, the right poem or essay can make a student a writer; it's about showing them that there are funny poems and heavy poems and list poems and response poems, and that whatever they want to write is welcome to be written.

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## SNEAK PREVIEW



Clips from several of Elizabeth Acevedo's popular spoken-word performances are available on YouTube:

"Hair"

<http://bit.ly/Acevedo-Hair>

"Beloved or If You Are Murdered Tomorrow"

<http://bit.ly/Acevedo-Beloved>

"Bittersweet Love Poem"

<http://bit.ly/Acevedo-Bittersweet>

Find Acevedo online at [www.acevedowrites.com](http://www.acevedowrites.com) and @AcevedoWrites

### How did being a writer influence your work as a teacher of writing?

My school curriculum sadly did not have a strong emphasis on writing, and so I had to sneak it in whenever I could; I don't know if I would have been so adamant that my students learn how to write effectively and communicate through writing if I hadn't been a writer. I was also always looking for ways to bring poetry into the classroom outside of the poetry unit. Giving my students creative outlets with which to respond to their reading came naturally and I hope reinforced that their ideas and words mattered.

### What did you like best about being a middle school teacher?

That age is a wondrous one for young people; they are in this liminal stage where they are still kids, but they are becoming young adults, and you can see how their mindsets are shifting and how they are learning about the space they take up in the world. I think it's a pivotal moment to catch them and remind them they are necessary and brilliant before they completely lose their childhood innocence or are bombarded with the insecurities that often spring up thereafter.

During the NCTE Annual Convention, Elizabeth Acevedo will join a panel of authors who write in ways that help students of all ages discover their own voices. On stage with Acevedo at the All-Attendee Event on Friday evening, November 16, will be Sharon Draper, Nina LaCour, Loren Long, and Matt de la Peña.

## “I'M LESS CONCERNED ABOUT THE TEXT WE HAVE TO USE; I'M MORE CONCERNED ABOUT THE SKILLS”

Read the full interview with NCTE member and Black Caucus Chair **Jamal Cooks**, a professor of language, literacy, and culture at San Francisco State University, at [bit.ly/Cooks-GivingBack](http://bit.ly/Cooks-GivingBack).



Jamal Cooks (left) receives the NCTE 2017 Richard W. Halle Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator, presented by Christopher Lehman, Middle Level Section Chair.

Innovative, creative teaching can include using nontraditional content, says Cooks, recipient of NCTE's 2017 Richard W. Halle Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator and a proponent of “cultural pedagogy.”

Such content can include movie clips (such as snippets from the film *Crash*), YouTube segments (sometimes he'll show comedian Trevor Noah's take on growing up Black in America), or hip-hop and rap lyrics. “You have to know your students,” says Cooks. For some, popular culture can be “an entrée, a hook, so to speak, to get them to engage in more academic work.”

Rather than focusing exclusively on the traditional canon, he says, “What's important to me is how do we get students to develop literacy skills? If getting them to develop the skills that we need is through a rap lyric, cool. If it's through current events, great. If it's through something on YouTube, excellent.

“I'm less concerned about what text we have to use; I'm more concerned about the skills. And to me that's real teaching—how you give students what they need to be able to learn the skills that you're trying to get them to walk out of your classroom with.”

JAMAL COOKS WAS INTERVIEWED FOR NCTE BY WRITER AND EDITOR LORNA COLLIER. REACH HER AT [LORNA@LORNACOLLIER.COM](mailto:LORNA@LORNACOLLIER.COM).