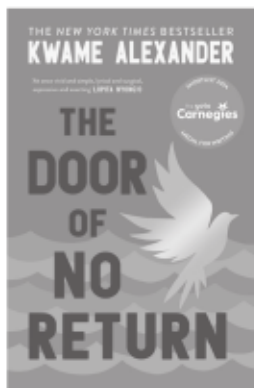


Read the first book in the trilogy,
the #1 *New York Times* bestselling *The Door of No Return*



'At once vivid and simple, lyrical and surgical, expressive and exacting'

LUPITA NYONG'O

'An intensely powerful coming-of-age story
steeped in African tradition and mythology'

WATERSTONES

'Absolutely spellbinding'

RICK RIORDAN

'A gripping coming-of-age story'

GUARDIAN

'Yet another brilliant, engrossing verse novel'

SARAH CROSSAN

'Captivating'

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW

'A riveting, not-to-be-missed trilogy opener'

KIRKUS, STARRED REVIEW

BLACK STAR

KWAME ALEXANDER

Book two of **The Door of No Return** trilogy



ANDERSEN PRESS

This edition first published in 2025 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA, UK
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

This edition published by arrangement with Little, Brown and Company Books for
Young Readers, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc., New York, New York, USA.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Kwame Alexander to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Copyright © KA Productions, 2024
Chapter openers: Adinkra symbol by Kate McKendrick Grove

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 83913 567 5

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

FOR SAMAYAH STANLEY AND NANDI ASSATA,
MY TRUE NORTHS

HOLD FAST TO DREAMS
FOR IF DREAMS DIE
LIFE IS A BROKEN-WINGED BIRD
THAT CANNOT FLY.

—LANGSTON HUGHES

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This is a novel inspired by history, based on the real lives of folks I've read about and imagined—some famous, others, like I said, made up. There are also people and places here that resemble my family, my heritage. You see, Black history is more than a timeline of “firsts” and “inventions.” It's also about the regular families that lived, laughed, loved, danced, worked, failed, hoped, cried, and died just like everybody else. I wrote this for them. To illustrate their humanity. And to remind us of our responsibility to acknowledge it. To respect it. Also, I love writing about America through the lens of sports, and as the poet Walt Whitman said, baseball is “the American game.” Enjoy.

IN THIS DREAM

her arm is a cannon
BOOM
and she, a SHOOTing star
shining in the night
playing catch
with the robin
and the blue jay
FLYing sky-HIGH
way up to the heavens.
She's somethin',
the angels whisper
looking down
at the diamond
there she goes
not far now
rounding third
but she can't remember
how to get there
she always gets lost
can't even see her feet anymore
so she asks her grandfather
who's sitting
on a cloud



CHAPTER ONE

THE STORY OF THE GOLDEN STOOL

Esi, back in the before times...in the old country... your nana's homeland...the place where the sea touched the sky...it is said that the people could fly...that one night, Oko, one of the founders of the Asante Kingdom, flew through the clouds and offered the moon a cluster of starfish...that the night was so grateful, in return she gifted Oko a sacred stool... crafted from the purest gold...adorned with golden bells...to house the soul of the people...that Oko descended from the heavens above...carrying the golden stool on his back...and that he landed at the

feet of the first Asante king, Osei Tutu I, who took the stool as his throne...and that it passed down generation to generation...but it was so sacred that it could only be sat upon by royalty...or by those with wings...

BUT WE ARE NOT KINGS

and I cannot fly,
so are you saying
that I must eat
my grits and bacon
each morning
and just stare at it
from the kitchen table,
that I will have to walk by it
each morning
on my way out
the door
to school
but I cannot touch it,
that it has been in this house
since before I was born
and you are the only one
who can sit in it?

That does not make sense to me, Nana,
unless you are saying
that you have
wings?

NANA KOFI

In the mornings,
my grandfather comes in,
kisses me
on both cheeks,
checks to make sure
his suitcase is still
next to the kitchen door,
picks up his tea with molasses
that I've made for him,
then sits on his wooden stool
with a star inside a wheel
carved on it
reading one of his favorite books
until I finish breakfast.
Then he stops, starts talking
like he's in the middle
of telling me a story
about his village
about a boy named Ebo
about a girl named Ama
about *Red Red*
about *Bayere*
about the *before* times

back when he lived on the other side
of the ocean
and memorized Shakespeare
and ate spicy foods that he still misses
that Momma refuses to cook
because Daddy's stomach gets upset
because *they don't have palm oil here, Nana,*
and whenever I ask him to tell me
how he got on this side
of the ocean
he gets up, walks into the den,
where his serious stories quickly turn
into funny tales
and trickster spiders
that have me sitting
on the edge of my seat
and falling on the floor
laughing.

TWI

I've been learning
the language
Nana used to speak
ever since I was a baby
and he taught me
how to say yes—*yoo*—
and no—*daabi*—
so now I understand him
when he forgets
to speak English sometimes
or talks Twi in his sleep
or is telling me a story
except when he slips
in a word
I've never heard before.

BAYERE?

He tells me
that it was the name
of a big festival each year
celebrating the harvest,
that it means yam,
that even though he grew sick
of having to eat it
he misses
the dry sweetness of it,
that his mother made plenty of it EVERY DAY
but she never made enough Red Red,
which was his favorite dish
and he only got one bowl
because his brother always ate three,
and then he gets quiet,
his eyes all glassy,
his big, wide grin
showing off his white teeth
like he's laughing
to keep from
crying.

ALWAYS

He always falls asleep
in his big chair
in the middle
of his story,
in the middle
of my questions.

What is Red Red?
Why don't you ever talk about your brother?

and he always
leaves me hanging
on the edge
of a cliff

waiting
for answers
I'm not sure
I even want
to hear.

MOMMA SAYS

*Charlene, let your nana sleep, why don't you.
Finish your chores,
then I can teach you
to play
a new tune.*

But I don't really enjoy
the flute
as much as she does,
so after I finish
dusting and mopping
and Willie Green shows up
hollering all loud
through our screen door,
holding
the old broomstick
we use for a bat,
even though he sometimes
gets on my nerves,
I ask her if I can go outside
because the only thing
I love doing

more than listening
to Nana Kofi's stories
is playing ball.

I GRAB THREE STICKS

of pink gum, my ball,
and the baseball cap
my daddy
brought me
when he came home
last month
from workin'
up north.

I see him
twelve times a year
and Christmas
on account of
he used to be
an oyster fisherman
around here
until all the oysters
got fished up,
so the government put a stop
until they can grow
some more.
So now he goes
up to Baltimore

on the first
of every month
and comes back
a few days before
the next one.

HOW I LEARNED TO LIKE BASEBALL

One summer
my daddy, Raymond
Tilton Cuffey, took me
on the train
with him
to Baltimore,
and while he worked
all day
I stayed
with his sister
and her sons
and I read these books
about a man named
Tarzan in Africa
that didn't sound anything
like Nana's Africa.

And every day
I kept hearing
and seeing
how much fun
my cousins

were having outside
throwing their ball around,
so one time
I put my book down
and asked
to join them
and at first
they laughed at me
but after I caught
the ball
with one hand
and threw it farther
than any of them
with the other
they let me keep playing.

And I liked it.

IN THE EVENINGS

Daddy would mostly
be too tired
to do anything
but eat
and fall asleep
while listening
to me read
to him,
but every now and then
he'd take me outside
and teach me
everything he knew
about baseball,
which it turns out
was a lot
because way before
I was born
he tried out
for a team called the Manhattans
in Washington, D.C.

I'd learn
how to swing,

where to hold the ball
when I pitch,
how to make it
twist and twirl
in the air,
how to play
the game, then
the next day
I'd show my cousins
and we'd spend all day
ripping and running
till our clothes were drenched
and our bodies were filthy
from slipping and sliding,
and the summer
was as good
as it was ever gonna be.

Then one day
it got even better.

SURPRISE

On the day before
I was to go
back home,
my aunt
made us wear fresh clothes,
said we couldn't get dirtied up
'cause we had to go somewhere,
made us stay inside
and read
and play card games
and sit down
and grow all fidgety
at not being able
to go outside
and be wild and free,
and so we fell asleep
'cause we were too tired
of being bored,
then Daddy's loud voice
woke us up
when he came home
early from work,
told us to get up,

that we were going
somewhere special
so we did, quick,
'cause we were sick
of being in the house
and couldn't wait
to find out where
somewhere was
and when we got to the park
and saw all those people
in the bleachers
we about fainted
and when we walked in the park
and smelled the freshly cut grass
and the popcorn in the air
we licked our lips
and when we sat down
on the bleachers
to watch an exhibition ball game
to see the world-famous Cyclone Joe Williams
of the Lincoln Giants
strike out almost everybody
on the Baltimore Black Sox team,
I no longer liked baseball.

I. LOVED. IT.

PROPER

I blow Momma a
kiss, slap my Black Sox ball cap
on, then run out of the

house fast before she
can tell me again all her
reasons why I should

not play ball, that *it*
is not normal, that *getting*
all sweaty is not

elegant, that *girls*
should stay clean, *be graceful*,
play piano or flute.

LET'S BALL, Willie Green shouts.

WILLIE GREEN

is my best friend

was born
on the same day
as me,
which he doesn't like
to celebrate
'cause it was the same
day his momma died

lives in a house
with his granny
and his brother Johnnie
that his daddy built
for his momma
with leftover wood
from the lumber mill
where he works
twelve hours
a day

has six other brothers
and sisters,

but they all live
in different places,
some nearby,
others up north,
and he says
they all boss him around
because he's the youngest

is seven hours older than me,
so he tries to boss me,
but it's hard to boss someone
when you have to look up at them
and since I'm three inches taller
he has to always
look up
to me

loves playing ball
as much as me but
doesn't think any girl can ever be
as good as him

is always complaining
that I throw the ball
too fast

got mad one time and said
real snarky-like,
Stop throwing so wild, Charrrrrrrrrr-lene,
so I placed my two fingers
and my thumb
in just the right position
like my daddy showed me,
like Cyclone Joe does,
and threw it slower
but made it drop down
right before he swung
so he would miss it
'cause my name is. **Not. Charlene.**
IT'S CHARLEY!

That slow enough for you, Willie Green?

MOSQUITO PARK

There's a field
we play in
right next to the church
that we call our ballpark
'cause it's the only empty field
we can play in,
and no matter what time
we go there
the mosquitoes
are always buzzing
and biting
like they've just been waiting
for fresh blood.

It rained
all last night,
so the field
is soggy
and the air is muggy
but that doesn't matter
'cause I have to practice,
'cause one day

I'll be in the Hall of Fame,
so today I play
the most beautiful game
in the world.

CONVERSATION WITH WILLIE GREEN

Do you got any more gum?

Do you *have* any more gum?

No, I'm asking you, Charley.

The correct grammar is *have*, not *got*.

There you go sounding like our teacher.

I swear, Charley.

Words matter, Willie Green. And yes, I do have another piece of gum, I say, giving him the stick I brought for him.

The ground is muddy.

It's not that bad.

I don't know, Charley.

Well, you can go home, if you need to. It'll just be me and Henry.

I didn't say I wasn't gonna play, Charley.

Then stop whining.

*I'm not whining. I just don't wanna get my pants
all dirtied 'cause then my granny gonna start
in on me.*

Just don't fall.

Hey, Charley, can I ask you a question?

I don't know, can you, Willie Green?

*Did you hear about that brand-new, real-deal
baseball field in Great Bridge?*

For real?

*Yup, Johnnie said he saw some boys playing
on it when he was over there cutting grass
for the rich folks.*

I went to a real ball field once.

*I know, I know, when yo' daddy took you to see the
Baltimore Black Sox. Why you always have to
bring that up and make me jealous?*

Maybe Daddy will take us both up there one day.

That would be outta this world, Charley.

You think he might?

It's possible.

I'd give anything to see a professional game.

I read in the *Journal and Guide* about this eighteen-year-old player who hit one ball so far, it nearly landed on the sun.

He play for the Baltimore team?

He's from St. Louis, on an amateur team right now, but they say next year he's gonna play for the Stars.

THE ST. LOUIS STARS! OOOOH, my granny's sister lives there. We might be going for Christmas.

Maybe I get to see a game.

Doubtful. It'll be too cold. But if you do, you'll get to see him hit with both hands.

A switch-hitter?

Yup. They call him "Cool Papa" Bell.

OOOH, I like that, Charley. I like that a lot.

Maybe you should call me Cool Willie Green.

I like that, too.

Anyway, it says he's so fast he can blow out a candle and be in bed before the light goes out. And, on top of that, he's a pitcher, too, who strikes out EVERYBODY . . . Just like I strike you out, huh?

He's not a girl, though.

Maybe I'll be the first girl pitcher to play
professional.

Keep dreaming, Charley.

I will, Willie.

Hey, y'all, I'm here, Henry screams, running toward
us, in his shorts too short, his socks always way
too long, and his stringy hair peeking out from
underneath his black cap.

We know, Henry. We can see you, Willie Green says,
heading to the plate to hit.

JONES MILL

Nana says
that Henry Jones
and his family
have been here
since the beginning,
that the town's named
after his great-granddaddy
who built the mill
and owned a lot of land
until the war came
and they had to sell
most of it
to the government
to pay off their debts.

Now they own
one piece of land
smaller than Nana's
and a tiny, one-room
dry goods store,
next to the mill,
that sells the best candy

and where Nana gets the tobacco
for his pipes.

Henry and I are not best friends
but we been playing ball together
since one day
when Nana Kofi took me with him
to do some shopping
and I was sitting
on the bench
in the front of their store,
looking at all the items
for sale
on the shelves: dried beans
lamps
sewing supplies
linens and silk
fancy hats
and my favorite, green apples,
when out of nowhere
a red rubber ball
comes flying
at me
and I snatch it
out of the air

right before
it could crash into my nose.

That's when Henry popped up
from around
the counter
and walked over to me
with his hands,
the color of snow,
outstretched.

I tossed him the ball
and he caught it
behind his back.

Wait, how did he do that?

We played catch
about ten times
in a row,
never saying a word,
just seeing
who would drop the ball
first.

I did.

I told him my name,
but I guess he was shy
'cause he just took his ball
and went back around
the counter.

On our way out the door
after Nana bought
his two packs of tobacco
I heard a *HELLO, CHARLEY*,
so I turned around
and there was the blond-haired boy
with green eyes
standing in front of the shop
with the ball in one hand
and waving at me
with the other.

My name is Henry.

Ever since then, he's been playing ball
with us.

PRACTICE

I'm the coach
and a player

When I pitch
say a prayer

I assign positions
decide who's on first

know who hits best
and who's the worst

Henry, you play outfield
Willie Green, at bat

I'm throwing heat
now, that's a fact

Ready to launch
winding my arm

This ball's on fire
better sound the alarm.

OUT HERE

We lose time
on our make-do
baseball diamond.

It could be hours
or days,
we don't mind.

We stop
when we're tired,
plop down
on the ground.

Talk about
what we gonna be
when we grow up.

Crack jokes.

Wish we had
some water
to quench
our thirst.

CONVERSATION

*I'm gonna be a musician, like my daddy. Play banjo
just like him, only I'm gonna make some money,
sell some records.*

I plan to be—

*We know, Charley, Willie Green says,
a PRO-fessional baseball player.*

What about you, Henry?

*Probably have to take over my daddy's store.
You don't want to?*

I don't know. Never really thought about it.

Well, if you did own a store, you could eat all the
candy and chocolate you ever wanted. Sounds
like a dream to me.

*I really want to leave here one day, though, go out
and explore.*

Like Columbus?

*Yeah, sorta, I guess. Don't y'all wanna see what's out
there?* Henry says, pointing up.

I ain't never leaving. Jones Mill is my home,
Willie Green says.

How are you supposed to be a big record star if you
never leave Jones Mill, Willie Green?

Good point.

Henry, Willie Green says there's a new baseball
field in Great Bridge.

*I know, it's next to the high school. My cousin plays
there.*

Maybe he can take us to play?

*You know we can't play on the other side of the
bridge, Charley.*

Who says we can't play over there?

Them.

That doesn't even make sense. Does it, Henry?

...

This is America. According to our Declaration
of Independence we are free and
independent, so we should be able to play
wherever.

Should *and* can is two different words. There's a law,
Charley.

Well, it's a stupid law, Willie Green, and it needs
to be changed.

*Maybe you should tell the president of the
United States*, he says, laughing.

Maybe I will.

Why can't y'all cross the bridge?

*Henry, it's dangerous over there . . . for us.
Dangerous how?*

Dangerous like Booker Preston.
Don't scare him, Charley.

I'm not. *He* asked the question.
Who's Booker Preston?

*He got beat up by a bunch of men over in
Great Bridge.*

He was on the other side of the bridge . . . at night.

*Coming home from hanging Christmas lights
for his boss.*

They said he stole some white man's dog.

My daddy says it was his own dog.

How can you steal your own dog, Willie Green?

You can't, Henry. You can't.

...

...

...

ON THE WAY HOME

nobody says much
of nothing,
we all just kinda
mosey along
a little somber
but mostly tired,
not really thinking
about baseball
or dinner
or anything
until we get
near my house
and our eyes start watering
and our noses start shimmering
from the delicious flavors
wandering out of
Momma's kitchen.

CONVERSATION

Y'all having chitlins for dinner, Charley?

No, we are not having chitlins.

Then what's that goooooood smell?

Meat loaf and mashed potatoes, Willie Green.

It's COOL Willie Green, please.

I'm not calling you that.

*That ain't fair, is it, Henry? She makes us call her
Charley, but she can't respect my new nickname.
He's right, Charley. It's only fair to.*

You shouldn't end a sentence with *to*.

Why not? Henry asks.

Because our teacher said that—

Here we go with school again. It's summertime, Charley.

Okay, I want a nickname.

How about we call you Hank or Ree?

Nope, don't like it.

Too Short? 'Cause of your pants, I say, which has us
all finally laughing again.

I got it, Willie Green screams. SOCKS!

Like in the Black Sox. That's cool, Willie Green.

*Naw, like on account of Henry's socks are knee-high
to a duck, Willie Green hollers, laughing so loud
he scares the birds nearby.*

Hmmm, I like that, Henry says. Socks. Yeah!

I'll see y'all later.

Bye, Charley.

Wait, you ain't gonna invite me in?

Not so long as you AREN'T going to speak good
grammar.

*Charley, you can be so uppity sometimes. I was just
wanting to say hello to Nana Kofi. See if he had
any more good stories is all.*

I'll tell him you said hello. See you tomorrow.

Maybe you'll learn how to hit my sliding ball.

She did strike you out!

Was because of the wind, Socks!

Bye, Willie Green.

You mean, Cool Willie Green.

...

Wait, can I ask you one more question, Charley?

*Why does your granddaddy keep that suitcase near
the door?*

For when he goes back home.

But ain— I mean, isn't that his home?

It is, I mean, but his old home, back in Africa.

How's he supposed to get back to Africa?

Marcus Garvey.

Who's Marcus Garvey? Socks asks.

...

EXODUS

Every week
when Momma makes groceries
she brings home
the newest issue
of the *Journal and Guide* newspaper,
which I read
out loud to her
while she cooks, then
I give it to Nana Kofi,
who was reading it one day
and saw
a big advertisement
in the back
about a new ship called
the Black Star Line
that a man named Marcus Garvey bought
to take anybody who wants to go
back to Africa.

That was two years ago
and ever since,
Nana's been going to
a Thursday evening meeting

of the local chapter
of Mr. Garvey's association
and every Friday
he checks the paper
to see
if a date has been set
on which the ship will leave
so he can go home
and nobody knows
that under my bed
I have a packed suitcase, too,
because I don't ever want to miss him
like he misses his old family
because a big part of me
wants to know why
his old home is still so special to him
when he has this new home,
when he has
us.