

★ **The Promise of Language: A Memoir**

Keith Gilyard

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Keith Gilyard's sprawling memoir *The Promise of Language* makes a passionate case for the power of language, particularly Black language, to transform lives and enliven art and culture.

Born in Harlem and raised in Queens, Gilyard grew up surrounded by the rhythms of Black vernacular speech and music. The son of Southerners, he learned early on to become a "language chameleon," watching as his mother, who dropped her Southern accent, altered her language patterns as she moved between work, church, and home. Influenced by Harlem street talk, Black radio, and gospel, Gilyard's interest in language and writing blossomed even as his teachers within the newly desegregated New York public school system attempted to adjust his speech to meet white standards of "correctness."

Gilyard describes his movements toward writing against the backdrop of rapid transformations in the US—the Cold War, the civil rights movement, and the burgeoning Black Power and Black Arts movements. In lively, nuanced, and often amusing vignettes, he describes his tumultuous experiences attempting to balance his dedication to academics with his growing political zeal and forays into drug addiction and petty crime. Always concerned with social change and Black radical politics, he asserts the connection between language, art, and struggles for liberation as he writes with tender admiration for the generations of writers who nurtured his talent and uplifted Black experiences.

Gilyard's love for language is made evident through the memoir's rich and fluid prose, which moves seamlessly between multiple linguistic registers and modes. While detailing his own coming-of-age, Gilyard also provides arresting accounts of the lives that shaped his, honoring friends and mentors and thereby conserving the collective memory of a place and transformative moment in time.

The Promise of Language is a compelling memoir about how, in its author's words, "language shapes lives and...lives shape language."

BELLA MOSES (January / February 2025)

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