



Bradley, Adam.

Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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If I had a dollar for every time I've heard someone disparage rap as being a bunch of noise, or devoid of talent, or lacking in creativity, then perhaps I'd be as rich as some of rap's biggest stars--okay, maybe I wouldn't be that rich, but I'd have a whole bunch of dollar bills in my pocket. Sometimes I ignore the charges and other times I defend rap music against them by explaining just how difficult it is to craft a song that's composed of multiple verses that are expected to make sense with each other as well as with the song's hook (i.e, its chorus, and don't get me started on the difficulty of writing a memorable [= catchy] hook that fits with the song's theme and maintains the artist's lyrical integrity), display clever wordplay by means of a variety of rhetorical devices (e.g., simile, metaphor, personification, etc.), all while *rhyming*. I noted in a review of Christian rapper Lecrae's album *Rebel* that rapping is "hard work" and I want to reiterate that here---rapping is hard work!---and I say this from a position of experience.

So it was with this knowledge of all that goes into rap, that is, good rap music, that I picked up Adam Bradley's (Associate Professor of English at the University of Colorado, Boulder) *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* and read it with great interest. First and foremost Bradley is a fan of the genre, and not only a fan, but a knowledgeable one at that! It was a delight to see him enthusiastically speak about Biggie Smalls, Eminem, Pharaoh Monch, Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, and countless others with appreciation and insight. But aside from being a fan of the music Bradley is a scholar, having earned a PhD in English from Harvard University in 2003. Bradley's

main areas of interest are in African-American literature and culture; hip-hop; Ralph Ellison; and 19th- and 20th-century American literature.

His degree in English has served him well in this volume as he examines rap over the course of six chapters divided into two sections. The first section deals with rhythm, rhyme, and wordplay while the second style, storytelling, and signifying ("a rhetorical practice that involves repetition and difference, besting and boasting" [181] — rap fans might be more familiar with this under the term *battling*) with a prologue, an introduction of sorts, and an epilogue to match. Bradley's knowledge of poetry and English literature has enabled him to offer an incisive examination of both the form and content of rap music. He's able to identify all manner of rhetorical devices at play (e.g., puns, prosopopoeia, onomatopoeia, kenning, antanacrisis, alliteration, assonance, etc.) and break down the structure of a rhyme whether it be delivered in couplets or iambic pentameter, whether it employs perfect rhymes or slant rhymes—I'm sure you get the point.

But aside from the formal features of rap Bradley understands some of the more subjective elements such as style and storytelling. With this knowledge in hand he's able to effortlessly quote Biggie or Nas and look not only to the types of story that they're telling, but how they're telling them, and also at the points they're trying to make and what kinds of responses these stories are meant to elicit from their listeners. Biggie can tell a gritty street tale and then lighten it up at the end with a joke that lets the listener know that everything isn't as serious as it might seem at first. Pac on the other hand is a street preacher who wants his audience to know that everything is exactly as serious as he makes it out to be. But perhaps what I appreciated most is that Bradley seems to understand the mindset of the rapper and the foundation of rap music. He offers this poignant observation:

Rap was born in the first person. It is a music obsessed with the "I," even to the point of narcissism. MCs become larger than life through rhyme, often projecting images of impervious strength. The flipside, of course, is vulnerability, something one sees only rarely, but which is powerful when it appears. When rappers talk about themselves, there is more at stake than the individual. Through self-exploration, they expose an expanse of meaning. (180-81)

Upon reading this paragraph I began to reflect on it and I came to realize that it offers some good insight into why I find Christian rap so generally unappealing, that is, Christian rap is not "obsessed with the 'I,' even to the point of narcissism." Christian rap is obsessed with God in Christ, which is virtuous, but somehow seems foreign *at the moment*. This isn't to say that Christian rap's lack of emphasis on the individual rapper won't seem more normal as time progresses, but at the moment it seems to somehow take away from an art form that was born in exaggerated expressions of arrogance (some real, some imagined for the purposes of the song). This also isn't to say that non-Christian rap is inherently godless since many rappers are

Christians who simply choose not to rap solely about their religious beliefs even though their faith shines through like rays of sunlight through unwashed windows at different points in their songs.

But I'll conclude this review by saying that Bradley's work is a masterpiece. It's a wonderful example of what a scholar who's passionate about a subject can do with it when he's not concerned with sounding scholarly and is instead more concerned with sounding like someone who really enjoys his subject matter. Bradley is clearly well-versed in the history of rap as well as with the artists and music itself, and his favorite rappers seem to align quite closely with mine so he won't lose any points there. But most impressive is what his training has lent to his examination. Now when someone chides about the simplicity of rap or how little talent it takes or whatever, I'll stop offering my own apologetic and instead refer them to this book. Bradley's purpose is to inform more than it is to defend, but in informing his readers about it he ends up offering a potent apologetic.