

Take 5: The Legacy of Jazz in Picturebooks

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In this column, we pay homage to jazz by examining picturebooks about the “cool cats” of jazz and the evolution of jazz music.

“Art in its many forms has survived to inform us of lives long gone. Art inspires, lifts our spirits, and brings beauty to our lives. We wish to pay homage to it and the people who created it.”

—Leo and Diane Dillon

PURPOSEFUL AND MEANINGFUL, the books we review motivate readers to delve into the creative and aesthetic impulses of jazz that reflect America’s musical and social history. Informed by European music traditions (Myers, 2006), jazz has deep origins in Africa, where music was and continues to be so essential to cultural tradition that leaders and storytellers employ music to teach, remember, and celebrate (Igus, 1998). The picturebook *Imani’s Music* by Sheron Williams (2002) speaks to this tradition in the form of an African folktale.

Whether it’s the blues, swing, bebop, cool jazz, Latin jazz, or fusion, jazz music is integral to American culture. In fact, some contemporary hip-hop artists are recognized for the jazz influences in their music (e.g., Common, *The Roots*, Yasiin Bey/Mos Def), while some jazz artists infuse their work with hip-hop rhythms, moods, and form (e.g., Robert Glasper, *Esperanza Spalding*; Dennison, 2012; Irwin, 2012). Here, our review of just some of the jazz picturebooks of the last decade (2003–2013) is inspired by the

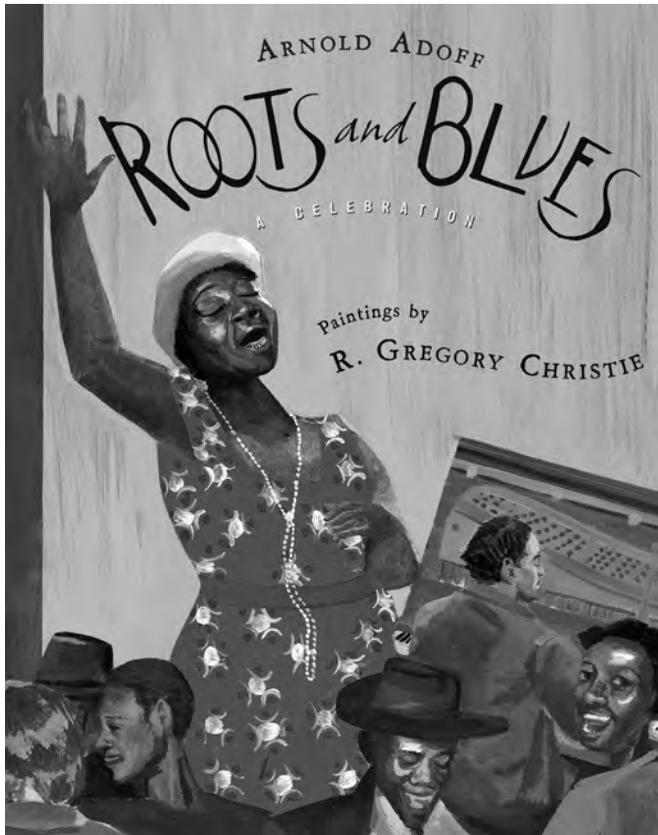
cool jazz classic “Take 5,” written in quintuple (5/4) time and popularized by the Dave Brubeck Quartet. Thus, our book collection is organized into five sections: *The Blues: Establishing Some of Jazz’s Roots*, *The Voices and Victories of Jazzwomen*, *The Journeys of Jazzmen*, *Connecting Children and Communities Through Jazz*, and *Syncopated Jazz Verse*. Although some books correspond with multiple categories, we attempted to group titles by their most salient features. Table 1 provides a legend of symbols so you can see information about each book at a glance.

TABLE 1
Picturebook legend

	Discusses multiple jazz artists
	Focuses on one jazz artist
	Provides additional informational text features (e.g., author’s note, timeline, glossary, references)
	Award winner
	Written in verse, rhythm, and/or melody

Category 1: The Blues: Establishing Some of Jazz's Roots

The blues, often associated with the South, are firmly rooted in the histories of African Americans. As a rich musical genre, it exemplifies how music serves as an emotionally fused foundation on which people mourn and survive. The books below provide readers with significant information about the historical trajectory of the blues, noted blues artists, and the role of the blues as living, lyrical testimonies of African Americans' resilience.



Roots and Blues: A Celebration

by Arnold Adoff, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie
New York, NY: Clarion, 2011



Roots and Blues is a lyrical and artistic preservation of human story in the face of continual persecution. The signature style of Adoff's poetic verse carries readers on rivers of hope, fortitude, and despair as they experience visceral connections to the various forms of enslavement that African Americans have experienced in the United States. Arnold Adoff showcases African Americans' transformation of human suffering into a musical genre that touches the core of the human soul and reverberates

beyond. His tribute to the masterful artists of the blues, (e.g., Muddy Waters, Ma Rainey, Big Joe Turner) on the endpages and in poems, as well as his "listenings," which read like blues lyrics, will further entrance readers.

The musical sustenance of *Roots and Blues* is enriched by the soulful illustrations of R. Gregory Christie. In his signature medium of acrylics and his artistic style of bodily emphasis as tribute, Christie masterfully uses cool hues of blues, greens, and purples with dynamic splashes of red and orange to convey the depth and breadth of the human spirit. Readers can truly see and feel the emotional pulls of history, song, and humanity. The continual interplay between Adoff's poetry and prose and Christie's color-saturated single- and double-page illustrations, which often bleed off the pages, provide readers with a visual treasury of memories. Regardless of readers' level of familiarity with either the histories of African Americans in the United States or the blues, this book will linger in the mind, heart, and soul.

Blues Journey

by Walter Dean Myers, illustrated by Christopher Myers
New York, NY: Holiday House, 2003



This award-winning tribute to the blues as lyrical memoirs of African Americans' experiences in the United States is a beautiful companion piece to *Roots and Blues*. Complete with an introductory lesson on the blues as well as a glossary of terms and a historical timeline, *Blues Journey* invites us into this musical and magical world. Myers's rhymes convey how the simple can actually be complex and invite deep contemplation. Christopher Myers's visually arresting collage of blue ink, white paint, and brown paper bag, all of which are widely accessible and versatile, continue this theme of the richness of simplicity. Each page takes us on a visual and lyrical journey.

The movement of images throughout the text mirrors the sweeping effect of the blues as song and story. Christopher Myers compels readers to follow the gazes of those illustrated, often in the direction of the lyrics, only to be called back to the illustrations through the lyrics, thus deepening the impact of both. He also stimulates curiosity through abstract images of expression and ambiguous scenarios, which invite contemplation and discussion. Ultimately, this father-son duo provides us with two levels of call-and-response opportunities: those between word and image and those between book and reader. One can't help

but become enraptured. Above all, *Blues Journey* serves as a testimony to life experiences and the various ways we express ourselves.

Category 2: The Voices and Victories of Jazzwomen

Since the 1920s, as evidenced by renowned jazz vocalists such as Florence Mills, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Lena Horne, and Sarah Vaughn, jazzwomen were key to the mainstream success of jazz music. Jazzwomen also had the chops to keep jazz afloat during the World War II era while many jazzmen served in the military. The books featured in this section celebrate a few women's diverse contributions to jazz music.

My Name Is Celia: The Life of Celia Cruz / Me Llamo Celia: La Vida de Celia Cruz

by Monica Brown, illustrated by Rafael López
Flagstaff, AZ: Rising Moon, 2004



Monica Brown's first-person biography about Cuban-born vocal virtuosa Celia Cruz (1924–2003) includes both Spanish and English text on each page. As the narrator of this story, Celia tells readers how she and famous Latin jazzmen, such as Tito Puente, Johnny Pacheco, and Willie Colón, “brought a new music to the Americas—salsa—a music that blended rock with rumba, mambo with jazz.” Early in her career, she fled Cuba with her husband, trumpeter Pedro Knight. Never to return to their homeland after the revolution, Celia and Pedro made their way to New York City. Here, her songs were “like smiles flying across the sky” and “were a gift to all of those Cubans who left their island and all the children of the Americas.” Beloved by thousands, she was revered as the Queen of Salsa. Perhaps in connection with the qualities of her beautiful voice, Rafael López symbolically includes birds in his illustrations. Alongside Brown's words are López's bold and mesmerizing acrylic paintings, just as colorful as Celia's costumes and as rhythmic and tropical as her music. As a result, *My Name Is Celia / Me Llamo Celia* is pure *azúcar* (sugar), sweet and satisfying.

Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Story of the Greatest All-Girl Swing Band in the World

by Marilyn Nelson, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney
New York, NY: Dial, 2009



In this beautifully illustrated collection of Marilyn Nelson's innovative poems, the instruments that once belonged to the young women of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm relive their touring days with this racially integrated all-girl jazz band (1935–1945). They remember nights at segregated dance halls as much as their USO tour abroad. For instance, “Tiny” Davis's trumpet recounts in “That Man of Mine,” “A girl had to trumpet down Jericho, if a man can't... / with hep-cat audacity...with nuanced bravado. / ...My gal could quote Satchmo [Louis Armstrong] so people stopped dancing to cheer.” In concert with Nelson's verse, Jerry Pinkney's stirring watercolor-collage spreads reveal the depth and layers of the Jazz Age decade that was underpinned by the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, World War II, Japanese internment, and Jim Crow. The final poem of this sophisticated set flashes forward to the eve of Hurricane Katrina, as “several old band instruments at midnight in the back room of Lebeau's One-Stop Pawnshop” sit in the dark. Here, the instrumentalists reminisce about the good old days as they literally and metaphorically wait for daylight to return. This book is a must for any jazz lover.

Harlem's Little Blackbird: The Story of Florence Mills

by Renée Watson, illustrated by Christian Robinson
New York, NY: Random House, 2012



“They called her Harlem's Little Blackbird. Her name was Florence Mills” is how Renée Watson introduces the jazz artist whose songs, performances, and activist work were never recorded but live on through memories and musical tributes, such as Duke Ellington's “Black

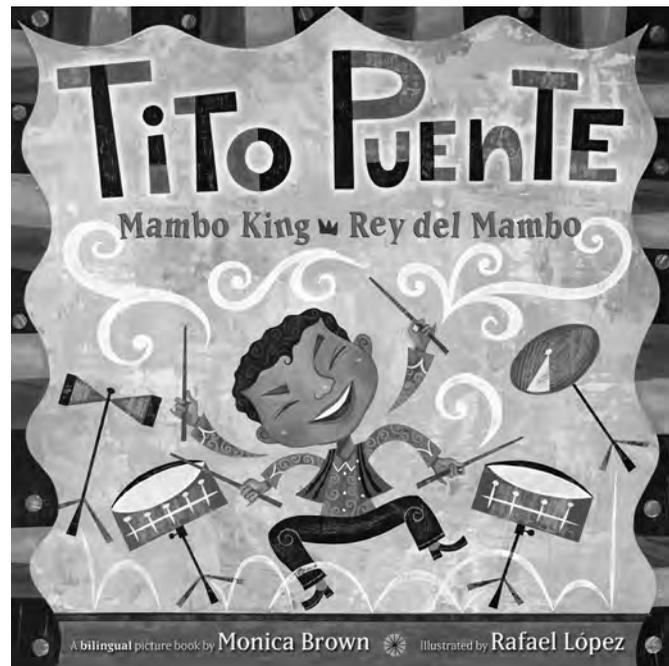


Beauty.” The daughter of former slaves, Florence dedicated herself to the arts and activism by participating in theatrical productions that introduced jazz to White audiences and promoting Black singers and actors during the Harlem Renaissance. Her activist stance ran so deep that she opted to sing for equal rights in productions such as *Blackbirds* rather than becoming the first Black female star in *Ziegfeld Follies*. When not performing, she “paid it forward” by visiting hospital patients and providing food and money to those in need. Christian Robinson’s use of collage, geometric shapes, and crisp yet warm color combinations emulate the warmth and generosity of Florence and have been associated with the work of famed Harlem Renaissance artists Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence. Additionally, the endpages—numerous blackbirds on connected tree limbs—serve as visual tributes to Florence’s nickname, music, and the far-reaching effects of her work. Even though her life was cut short at the young age of 31, her talent and benevolence live on through tributes such as this picturebook biography.

Category 3: The Journeys of Jazzmen

The legacy of jazz music is punctuated by the personal journeys and achievements of jazz cats who had the creative and technical abilities to push the boundaries of musical

expression and make people stop and listen. The following picturebook biographies provide us with stories often lost amid other tributes to renowned jazz artists and stories that provide deeper understandings of the musicians we love.



Tito Puente, Mambo King / Tito Puente, Rey del Mambo

by Monica Brown, illustrated by Rafael López
New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2013



Via the color-rich compositions of illustrator Rafael López and the Spanish and English prose of Monica Brown, this picturebook celebrates the life and musical innovations of five-time Grammy award winner and Latin jazz legend Tito Puente. His prowess for percussion began with pots and pans as a child and evolved into a “¡Tum Tica! / ¡Tac Tic! / ¡Tum Tic! / ¡Tom Tom!” (front flap) rumba beat on the timbales, congas, and bongos. This rhythm repeats like a refrain throughout the biography. In accessible language, Brown highlights key moments along Tito’s life journey, such as his service to the Navy in World War II, studies at the Juilliard School, and performance at the Palladium with his very own orchestra. Meanwhile, López captures Tito’s genius at the nexus of the Latin jazz explosion through vibrant acrylic paintings on wood panels. In one of Lopez’s final spreads, Tito collaborates with Latin American artists Carlos Santana, La Lupe, and Queen of Salsa Celia Cruz, who appears to reign over sea and sky like a magical songbird of rainbow hues. Appealing on multiple levels, this book is sure to delight the senses as an aesthetic experience unto itself.

kind of jazz” like “zeebidee BOP—zoo buoy dee BOP BOP.” Ultimately, his name appears on theater marquees as the revolutionary headliner with the new rhythm and chords of bebop. Like hot lava, Qualls shows the way music surged and flowed from Dizzy’s trumpet in saturated hues of red across many of the book’s two-page spreads. Even readers who are unfamiliar with jazz will be hooked by the creative spirit and tenacity that Winter and Qualls capture in *Dizzy*.

Category 4: Connecting Children and Communities Through Jazz

Jazz, a language that connects people to one another and the world, is frequently collaborative and improvisational in nature. Like *The Jazz of Our Street* (Shaik, 1998), a pre-Hurricane Katrina picturebook (out of print) that transports readers to a parade in the Tremé district of New Orleans, these highlighted books speak to how communities celebrate and exalt jazz.



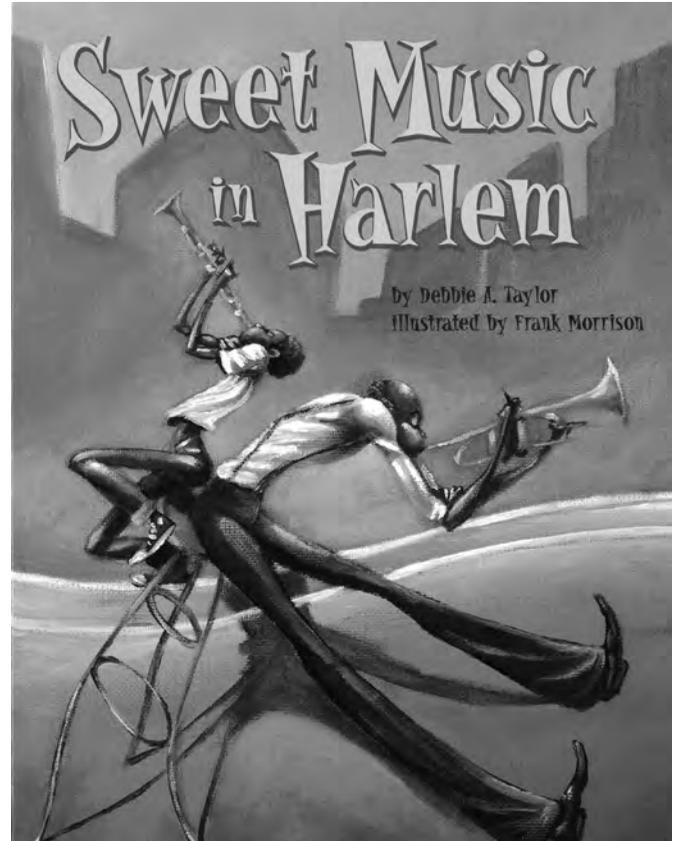
The Deaf Musicians

by Pete Seeger and Paul DuBois Jacobs, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie
New York, NY: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2006



When Lee the jazz pianist loses his hearing, the bandleader dismisses him and asks, “Who will listen to a deaf musician?” In *The Deaf Musicians*, the answer is everyone! Lee learns that he can still feel and play jazz through the syncopation of sign language. Before long, he forms a quartet of three signing musicians and sign-language interpreter/vocalists. Pete Seeger and Paul DuBois Jacobs conclude this fictional story on a high note, as “Night after night, Lee and his band would meet in the subway

to perform—*snazzy style*”—for audiences bigger than the jazz clubs Lee once played. R. Gregory Christie’s appreciation for the boundless quality of modern jazz is infused in the energy, movement, and color compositions of each of his two-page spreads. Presumably set along the subway line of New York City, the illustrations likewise reinforce that people of many different races, experiences, and abilities can join together in a common appreciation for music and artistic expression.



Sweet Music in Harlem

by Debbie A. Taylor, illustrated by Frank Morrison
New York, NY: Lee & Low, 2004



This fictional story is inspired by “A Great Day in Harlem,” the iconic 1958 photograph of 57 jazz legends by *Esquire* magazine freelance photographer Art Kane. Upon opening to the first page of this story, readers will be immediately drawn to the incomparable illustrations of Frank Morrison, whose paintings are included in the private collections of Queen Latifah, Bill Cosby, and Maya Angelou. Morrison’s stylized narrative paintings swing across each page. They lead readers on a tour of 1950s Harlem as a boy searches for his uncle’s beret in the barbershop, diner, and jazz club

before the neighborhood “jazzy folks” gather on the steps of a brownstone for a group photo. As a result, Debbie Taylor’s text seems secondary. Nonetheless, her prose includes jazz slang and clarifies that a grateful Uncle Click is hip to nephew C.J.’s desire to be a jazzman. He gives C.J. a new clarinet and his elusive beret because “You know, a jazzman like you is going to need a good hat.” This worthwhile book merges community, family, and jazz.



Jazz Baby

by Lisa Wheeler, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie
Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2007



As illustrated by the book cover, *Jazz Baby* accentuates the beauty and power of community and love through music. Anyone who reads this picturebook will be compelled to sing and sway to the rhythm of both song and story. Readers will want to join the people in this intergenerational neighborhood in their celebration of life and their attempts to lull a baby to sleep. Verses such as “Brother’s hands tap. Sister’s hands snap. Itty-bitty Baby’s hands CLAP-CLAP-CLAP” and “Mama sings high. Daddy sings low. Snazzy-jazzy Baby says, ‘GO, MAN, GO!’” beckon to be shared aloud. Caution: Reading this story aloud may result in daylong, impromptu scat sessions by audience members!

R. Gregory Christie conveys movement effortlessly through the curves of the text, which often follow the curves of characters’ arms and legs as they move to the beat of

the story. In the past, Christie has made this infectious picturebook come even more alive by asking jazz singers to sing Lisa Wheeler’s text while he paints. Such demonstrations reiterate the need for art and music in our lives and illustrate how a simple story can enrich the lives of many.

When Louie Armstrong Taught Me Scat

by Muriel Harris Weinstein, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie
San Francisco, CA: Chronicle, 2008



Imagine a day beginning with dance and ending with Louis Armstrong teaching you scat! Such is the life of a young girl who becomes enraptured with jazz music. To both of their delight, mom and daughter “Fly it like a like,...String it out like beads,” never wanting to stop dancing to jazz. The girl’s musical experience extends through the night when Louis visits her dreams and apprentices her in singing scat (and scatting about bubble gum, no less!). Her musical escapades become part of her daily activities as she scats upon awaking, while eating breakfast, and playing with her friends.

R. Gregory Christie’s fanciful illustrations depict the physical and emotional movement of song and illustrate, in poetic form, the nonsensical rhymes of scat. Young readers will delight at how bugs, mozzarella, hippopotamuses, baboons, and others become part of the scat story. Varied size fonts and typefaces that represent both sound and image beckon to be sung. Muriel Harris Weinstein’s book is truly a magical treat that many will want to revisit.

Category 5: Syncopated Jazz Verse

Although several of the texts presented in this review are written in verse, this section is hip to books about jazz cats and their axes that are neither biographies nor historical accounts.

This Jazz Man

by Karen Ehrhardt, illustrated by R.G. Roth
Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2006



This highly interactive picturebook by Karen Ehrhardt for younger readers offers an opportunity to engage in musical crossovers while learning about legendary jazz musicians. Set to the rhythmic tune of “This Old Man,” *This Jazz Man* sets the literary stage for a musical experience through

TABLE 2

Supplemental picturebook pairings

Category 1: The Blues: Establishing Some of Jazz's Roots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Igu, T. (1998). <i>I see the rhythm</i>. (M. Wood, Illus.). San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press. ■ Weatherford, C.B. (2000). <i>The sound that jazz makes</i>. (E. Velasquez, Illus.). New York, NY: Walker.
Category 2: The Voices and Victories of Jazzwomen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Novesky, A. (2013). <i>Mister and Lady Day: Billie Holiday and the dog who loved her</i>. (V.B. Newton, Illus.). Boston, MA: Harcourt. ■ Pinkney, A.D. (2002). <i>Ella Fitzgerald: The tale of a vocal virtuosa</i>. (B. Pinkney, Illus.). New York, NY: Jump at the Sun.
Category 3: The Journeys of Jazzmen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Mathis, S.B. (2001). <i>Ray Charles</i>. (G. Ford, Illus.). New York, NY: Lee & Low. (Original work published 1973) ■ Pinkney, A.D. (1998). <i>Duke Ellington: The piano prince and his orchestra</i>. (B. Pinkney, Illus.). New York, NY: Hyperion.
Category 4: Connecting Children and Communities Through Jazz	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Dillon, L., & Dillon, D. (2007). <i>Jazz on a Saturday night</i>. New York, NY: Blue Sky.
Category 5: Syncopated Jazz Verse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Holiday, B., & Herzog, A., Jr. (2003). <i>God bless the child</i>. (J. Pinkney, Illus.). New York, NY: Amistad. ■ Marsalis, W. (2005). <i>Jazz ABZ: An A to Z collection of jazz portraits</i>. (P. Rogers, Illus.). Cambridge, MA: Candlewick. ■ Raschka, C. (1992). <i>Charlie Parker played be bop</i>. New York, NY: Orchard. ■ Raschka, C. (1997). <i>Mysterious Thelonious</i>. New York, NY: Orchard. ■ Raschka, C. (2002). <i>John Coltrane's giant steps</i>. New York, NY: Atheneum.

of Carole Boston Weatherford's song begin with the phrase "Before John was a jazz giant, he heard...." Sounds like "birds warbling," "hambones knocking in Grandma's pots," "Grandpa's Sunday sermons," and "big bands on the radio" filled his early years. In the sixth stanza, John "picked up that horn," and the final stanza concludes, "Before John was a jazz giant, he was all ears." Akin to his illustrations for *Dizzy*, Sean Qualls's color palette for this picturebook is likewise muted with accents of black, white, and saturated color that bubbles and swirls from each of John's sonic inspirations. This book pairs well with *Spirit Seeker: John Coltrane's Musical Journey*.

Conclusion

Our foray into jazz music, as chronicled by this collection of children's picturebooks, honors the significance

of jazz music in American culture. When creating this collection, we recognized the need for more books that tap youths' funds of knowledge around music. One book that attempts to bridge this gap is *Hip Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry With a Beat*, edited by Nikki Giovanni (2008) and accompanied by an audio CD of 30 performances. In surveying the broader body of children's literature about jazz, we noticed a distinct absence of quality books about female artists, especially when compared with the male artists. Thus, more books that highlight the interests and accomplishments of women in music are encouraged. Finally, we propose that within the constructs of current education standards, children's literature can serve as a vehicle not only for reading deeply but also for incorporating the arts into our youths' educational experiences. See Table 2 for additional, positively reviewed texts that supplement each of our five categories. ■

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