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# Activity Guide

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## Blues Journey

### ABOUT THE STORY

Using the words from various blues songs, the author and illustrator trace a blues journey across time and space, showing the basis for and the meaning of the blues in this country.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Walter Dean Myers was born in West Virginia family in 1937 and grew up in New York City. In 1970, he was hired as an acquisitions editor for Bobbs Merrill, a publisher interested in developing more black writers for young people. Already, he had published his first children's book, and in 1975, he wrote his first young adult novel. Two years later, he began writing full time. He has twice received Newbery Honor recognition and is a three-time recipient of the Coretta Scott King Award.

### ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Christopher Myers is the son of acclaimed author Walter Dean Myers. He is a graduate of Brown University and has participated in the exclusive Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Studio Program. Myers began his children's book career doing research to help his father, and went on to illustrate several of the elder Myers' books. In 1998, the two collaborated on *Harlem*, which was named a Caldecott Honor Book as well as a Coretta Scott King Honor Book. Myers' solo effort, *Black Cat*, was also a Coretta Scott King Honor Book. Christopher Myers lives in Brooklyn, NY.

### INTRODUCING THE STORY

Ask children if they have ever heard any blues songs. Explain that the blues is a musical form that came out of the south and expresses the pain, suffering, and even the joy that a hard life can bring. Tell children that the book they will read uses words from blues songs to tell a story.

### READING ACTIVITIES

#### Comprehension/Thinking Skills

- "What is 'my supposed-to-be' that the speaker seeks?" (*Analyze*)
- "Why does the speaker's brother stop crying?" (*Draw Conclusions*)
- "What does the root woman mean when she says the speaker's day is coming soon?" (*Analyze*)
- "What is the 'strange fruit' hanging in the tree?" (*Analyze*)
- "What feeling do these songs' words give you as you read them?" (*Make Inferences*)

#### Vocabulary

Write these word parts on the chalkboard. Ask children to copy the lists and draw lines linking the parts of each compound word. Then have them use three of the words in their own sentences.

black	road
cross	tub
land	bird
wash	lord

### CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

#### Social Studies: Blues Geography

Show children a map of the United States, and explain that most blues are associated with three American cities. To illustrate, identify the following blues styles for the children and point out their locations on the map:

- Delta blues—unamplified guitar, rhythmic and spoken vocals, drones, moans, and a "heavy" texture
- Memphis blues—smooth and arranged, brass and/or saxophones prominent, heartfelt vocals, and a lighter feel
- Chicago blues—simple structure, electricity, amplification, bass-drums-guitar-harmonica instrumentation, "raw" sounding

You might play some examples of these different blues sounds for children. Some possibilities include: Skip James, "Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues" (Delta); B.B. King, "Three O'Clock Blues" (Memphis), and Muddy Waters, "Mannish Boy" (Memphis).

#### Music: Drumming the Blues

Have children make their own drums for playing blues rhythms. Provide them with the following materials: Juice can, oatmeal box, potato chip can, or other such container; 2 large balloons; 2 heavy rubber bands; 2 pencils with erasers. Then have them follow these steps for each end of the can:

- Open both ends of the container for the body of the drum.
- Cut small ends off the balloons.
- Stretch the closed end of the balloon over the body of the drum.
- Use the rubber band to hold the balloon in place.

Children can use the pencils as drum sticks. Play blues songs so they can drum along as they listen.

#### Language Arts: Blues Tell a Story

Each of the song parts in the book tells part of a story. Ask children to think about the words on one of the pages and the story they tell. Have them write down their version of the whole story behind the words. Encourage them to use their imaginations as they write. Volunteers can read their stories aloud to the class.

#### Music: Writing the Blues

Encourage children to write their own blues songs. Working in pairs, children can write a song in the "call and response" style described in the introduction to the book. One child can write the "call," and the other can write the response. Children can make their song as long or short as they want. Encourage volunteers to read or sing their finished songs to the class.

### INTERNET ACTIVITY

Before you send children to do research using any of the keywords listed below, you may wish to try them yourself to be sure the sites are suitable.

#### A Blues Museum

Have children visit the Delta Blues Museum website at <http://www.deltabluesmuseum.com/>. Children will enjoy looking through the listings of exhibits at the museum and reading about the blues and blues musicians. Encourage them to write down one piece of interesting information or a description of one exhibit that they would like to see and share it with the rest of the class.