



**Classroom Guide for  
THE JONES FAMILY EXPRESS**  
by Javaka Steptoe

**Reading Level**

\*Reading Level: Grades 2–3

Interest Level: Grades 1–4

Guided Reading Level: P

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.4/0.5

**Themes**

Family, Togetherness, Urban Life, Creativity, Travel, Giving, African American Interest

**Synopsis**

Steven wants to give his Aunt Carolyn a special gift when she arrives for the annual block party. He and she have a special relationship; for as long as he can remember, she has sent him postcards from her numerous travels around the country and the world. After much searching in neighborhood stores, Steven finds an old, battered toy train in his uncle's cluttered apartment. Steven makes the train into the perfect gift for his aunt. He paints it, and in each window, he pastes a photograph of a family member. On the side, he adds the words "The Jones Family Express." After the block party, Aunt Carolyn gives Steven the perfect gift too. It is a postcard inviting him to join her on her next trip.

**Background**

The illustrator/author, Javaka Steptoe, says of this book that it is "a collage of different parts of my life." The book's setting is Brooklyn, New York, where Steptoe makes his home. Like his main character, Steven, Steptoe finds inspiration in his everyday life there, and like Aunt Carolyn, Steptoe enjoys traveling. He says, "Every time I leave home I gain a greater understanding of the world I live in."

**Teaching Tip**

When sharing *The Jones Family Express* you will want to be sensitive to children who live in extended family situations. Some students may notice that in this story Steven lives with his grandmother and other relatives. His parents are not mentioned.

## BEFORE READING

### Prereading Focus Questions

Before introducing the book, share the background information with students. Then you may wish to explore one or more of the following questions with them.

1. What are some places you have visited? How did you travel to get there? Where would you like to go next? What are some things you might learn from traveling?
2. Have you ever been to a block party? What are some of the things you find at such an event? What kinds of things do people do there?
3. Who are your favorite relatives? Why do you like them?
4. What things do you think about when selecting a gift for someone? What do you think is the most important thing about giving a gift? Why?
5. What is the best gift you have ever given? Why was it so special? What is the best gift you have ever received? Why was it the best?

### Exploring the Book

Display the book and read aloud the title. Ask students what they think the express is in this story.

Invite students to study the book cover illustrations, both front and back. Ask them where they think the boy is. Where is he going? What might he be carrying? Who is hugging him on the back cover?

Have students examine the inside front and back pages. Ask why they think there are so many postcards shown. To whom were they sent? Who sent them? Flip through the book and point out how the postcard theme is used visually throughout the pages.

### Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to find out what the Jones Family Express is and why there are so many postcards shown.

## VOCABULARY

Write the following words from the book on the chalkboard and point out that they are all related to travel. Have students take turns using each word in a sentence related to travel. Challenge students to add other travel words that they know to the list.

|            |           |          |          |
|------------|-----------|----------|----------|
| express    | train     | arrive   | station  |
| traveling  | country   | suitcase | postcard |
| visited    | direction | places   | pack     |
| everywhere | bags      |          |          |

Encourage students to look through the story text for other groups of words. For example, students might make a list of compound words, words about city life, or words referring to time. Have students use these words in sentences as well.

## READING AND RESPONDING

### Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, review comprehension, and develop students' understanding of the book. Encourage students to refer back to the text and illustrations to support their responses.

1. Who is telling this story? How do you know?
2. Why does Steven look forward to Aunt Carolyn's visit so much? Why is she so important to him?
3. Why is Aunt Carolyn coming to visit?
4. Why does Steven try to avoid his relatives after breakfast? What does he do to get away?
5. What stores does Steven visit? Why does he have trouble finding a good gift for his aunt?
6. How does Uncle Charles help Steven? Why does Steven keep seventy-five cents from his uncle?
7. Why is the gift Steven makes so appropriate? How does it connect Aunt Carolyn to the family?
8. What is the block party like?
9. How does Uncle Charles use the money Steven paid him? Why is Steven surprised by this?
10. How does Aunt Carolyn show her appreciation to Steven? What gift does she give him? Why is it "the best present of all"?

### Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to those in the Discussion Questions section.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for passages that suggest the feelings of different family members throughout the story.
- The **Illustrator** might draw pictures of a few of the places that Aunt Carolyn has visited.
- The **Connector** might find other books about urban family life.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might research to learn more about living in Brooklyn, New York, or about how to use collage to create decorations or illustrations.

\*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *Getting Started With Literature Circles* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *Literature Circles: Voice And Choice In Book Clubs And*

*Reading Groups* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *Literature Circles Resource Guide* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

### **Reader's Response**

Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize what they have read. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, oral discussion, or drawings.

1. In this story, postcards from an aunt make Steven feel special. What kinds of things might make you feel this way?
2. Give an example of how the art helps tell this story.
3. Based on the story, how would you describe Uncle Charles? Why do you think he acts the way he does?
4. What does this story tell you about Steven's family?
5. Find a few different examples of giving or sharing in the story.

### **Other Writing Activities**

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for students to share and discuss their work.

1. Pretend you are one of Steven's friends. Write a postcard message that you might send to him. If possible, find a picture postcard from your community, town, or state and write your message on the postcard.
2. Suppose you are a reporter for a Brooklyn newspaper. Write an article about the block party for your paper.
3. Write compare and contrast paragraphs showing how your family is similar to and different from Steven's.
4. Make up a secret recipe for barbecue sauce to share with Steven's grandfather.
5. Aunt Carolyn often told funny stories about her travels. Write a story that she might tell Steven.
6. Think about another gift that would be good to give Aunt Carolyn. Describe the gift and explain why you want her to have it.

### **ELL (ESL) Teaching Strategies**

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Have these students dictate questions about the book. Set aside time to help students explore these queries.
2. Have volunteers act out parts of the story. For example, they might dramatize Steven's search for a gift in Mr. Perkins's drugstore or in Ms. Ruby's shop.

3. Model how to use the illustrations to enhance understanding of the text. Read aloud and point out how an illustration provides clues to the words.

### INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

To help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas, you might try some of the following activities.

#### Social Studies

1. Have students study the text and postcards in the book to compile a list of place names. Remind students that they may find clues in the pictures and postcard stamps as well as the small print on some cards. When the list is complete, have students work in pairs to locate each place on a map or globe.
2. Ask students to think of a few places they would like to visit. Then have them work in groups, with each group planning a trip to one of the places suggested. Suggest that students present their work in a folder as a trip planner. Students might include a description of the destination; its location; expected weather and climate conditions; places of interest such as monuments, museums, parks; suggested clothing to pack; and means of travel from your community to the selected place.

#### Art

1. Tell students that Javaka Steptoe's collage illustrations include various kinds of torn paper, cut paper, ribbon, pencil, paint, and other found items. You might also want to display a copy of the poetry book *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall*, illustrated by Steptoe, in which he created collages with a different range of materials. Provide a variety of materials, glue, and scissors and challenge students to experiment with their own forms of collage illustration. Students may also bring in additional items that they find outside of school. Use the final work for a classroom art show.
2. Talk with students about the kinds of information that should be included on a poster advertising a block party. Then invite students to design a poster for the block party the Jones family attends, or for a block party or street fair that might be taking place soon in their neighborhood.

#### Writing/Music

Two kinds of music are mentioned in the book: rap and country. If possible, play samples of both for the class. (You may wish to ask students to bring in selections from their own collections.) Help students identify some of the instruments used in country music. Suggest that students write their own raps about a school, neighborhood, or community event.

#### Literature

Mention that Javaka Steptoe's father, John Steptoe, was also a well-known and innovative author and illustrator of children's books. John Steptoe's (1950–1989) books include *Stevie*, *The Story of Jumping Mouse: A Native American Legend*, and *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale*. Have students plan to read aloud one of John Steptoe's books to children in a younger grade. More information about John Steptoe can be found online at: [falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/steptoe.htm](http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/steptoe.htm).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR

**Javaka Steptoe** is a graduate of The Cooper Union in New York City. He works as an illustrator and a fine artist. He also speaks frequently to teachers and children around the country, and has been a teacher of art at the Brooklyn Children's Museum. Born in 1971, Steptoe is the child of two artists, Stephanie Douglas and John Steptoe. "I always drew around the house," he says. As a child, Steptoe's favorite books were *Ferdinand the Bull* and *The Porcelain Egg*. Steptoe says that he identifies with the main characters in these books because of their determination to do the impossible. For his illustrations, Steptoe has won numerous awards including the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award for *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall*.

Steptoe makes his home in Brooklyn, New York, and says that he finds inspiration in his everyday life there. "Walking down the street, going to the movies, having conversations with the people I meet, and making mistakes. I see all these experiences as opportunities for me to expand my mind and be able to look at things differently. I try not to take life for granted." Of his work, Steptoe says, "I want my audience, no matter what their background, to be able to enter into my world and make connections with comparable experiences in their own lives."

*The Jones Family Express* has received numerous awards and honors. These include:

- "Choices" and Book of the Week selections, Cooperative Children's
- Books Center (CCBC)
- Best of the Best List, Chicago Public Library
- 100 Titles for Reading and Sharing, New York Public Library
- Recommended Title, New York Is Book Country

## RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about *The Jones Family Express* at:

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/72/hc/the\\_jones\\_family\\_express](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/72/hc/the_jones_family_express)

### Also illustrated by Javaka Steptoe

#### *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall*

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/66/hc/in\\_daddy\\_s\\_arms\\_i\\_am\\_tall\\_african\\_americans\\_celebrating\\_fathers](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/66/hc/in_daddy_s_arms_i_am_tall_african_americans_celebrating_fathers)

### Video interview with Javaka Steptoe

[http://www.leeandlow.com/p/javaka\\_interview.mhtml](http://www.leeandlow.com/p/javaka_interview.mhtml)

### Booktalk with Javaka Steptoe on *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall*

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/steptoe.mhtml>

### Active Reader Classroom Guides

[http://www.leeandlow.com/p/teachers-african\\_american.mhtml](http://www.leeandlow.com/p/teachers-african_american.mhtml)

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