

Classroom Guide for
THE PIANO
by **William Miller**
illustrated by **Susan Keeter**

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grade 2

Interest Level: Grades 1–4

Guided Reading Level: O

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.6/.5

Lexile™ Measure: 440

Themes

Music, Determination, Friendship (Intergenerational and Interracial), African American Interest

Synopsis

Tia lives in a southern town in the early 1900s. The one thing Tia loves most is music, and she spends the hot summer days wandering around town searching for new sounds. One day she ventures across the railroad tracks to the white side of town and is drawn to the gate of a house where she hears wonderful music. Before she knows it, Tia has taken a job as a maid for the owner of the house. Although the work is hard for a young girl, Tia loves the music that Miss Hartwell listens to on her record player. She is also fascinated by Miss Hartwell's grand piano and finally convinces her employer to help her learn to play. The two become friends as they care for each other and share their love of music.

Background

The racial segregation alluded to in this story was commonplace in southern states from the 1870s through the first half of the twentieth century. So-called Jim Crow laws kept whites and blacks apart in almost all aspects of life. In addition to living in separate sections of towns, most public places had separate entrances and often separate sections for blacks and whites. Some institutions such as schools were in completely

different buildings. Segregation didn't begin to end until the Supreme Court started handing down landmark rulings such as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, in 1954 and Congress began passing bills such as the Civil Rights Act of 1957. This latter law was followed by other civil rights acts including one in 1960, 1964, and 1968. Together, these laws provided for increased voting rights, ended discrimination in restaurants, hotels, and other businesses, established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, ended discrimination in the sale or rental of housing, and much more.

Given the social and racial climate at the time of the story, the friendship that develops between Tia and Miss Hartwell is unusual. It is a testament to the transforming power of music and the bonds that can develop between people, no matter how different their ages and backgrounds.

Teaching Tip

You may wish to use this book as part of your celebration of Black History Month, which is observed in February.

BEFORE READING**Prereading Focus Questions**

Before introducing the book, you may wish to have students discuss one or more of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. What is your favorite kind of music? Why do you like it?
2. When do you play or listen to music?
3. How hard are you willing to work for something you really want? What is an example of something you would work hard for?
4. How do you learn new skills?
5. Who are some of the older people in your life? How do they help you? How do you help them?
6. What kinds of things do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

Exploring the Book

Display the book cover and ask students to study it carefully. Ask them why they think the girl looks so happy. Whom do you think she is looking at? How is the girl dressed? What do her clothes suggest about her? Do you think the piano is hers?

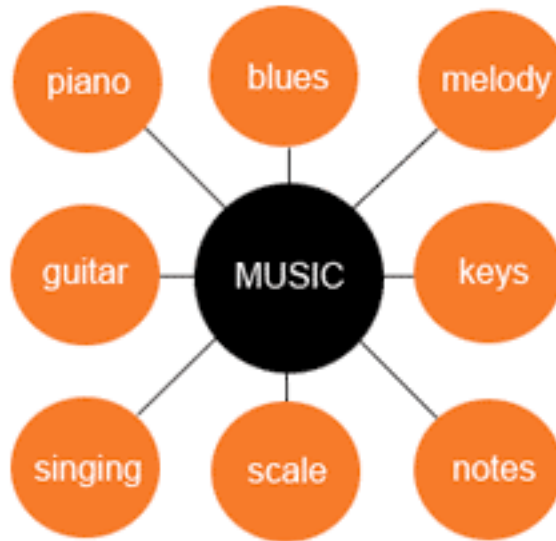
Point to the author's name and ask students if they have read any other books by William Miller. (See About the Author below for a list of some of the author's other books for children.)

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Ask students to read to find out what is so important about the piano in this story.

VOCABULARY

Have students make a word web to show the words in the story that are related to music. Then ask students to use each word on the web in a sentence. Encourage students to look up the meaning of any word with which they are unfamiliar. As a challenge, have students find another word related to music to add to the web. Invite students to read aloud their sentences.

**READING AND RESPONDING****Discussion Questions**

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to help guide their understanding of the book. Encourage students to refer to passages or pages in the book to support or illustrate their responses.

1. What caused Tia to cross the railroad tracks in her town? Why was this an unusual thing to do?
2. What did Tia think of when she heard music? Where do you think she got these ideas from?
3. Why did Tia take the maid's job at Miss Hartwell's?
4. What did Tia and Miss Hartwell share?
5. Why was it hard for Miss Hartwell to give piano lessons to Tia? How do you think Miss Hartwell felt about this?
6. Why did Johnny leave Miss Hartwell's? Why do you think he felt the way he did about white people?
7. How were Johnny and Tia different?
8. Why did Tia do Johnny's work after he left?

9. How did Miss Hartwell show that she cared about Tia?
10. What are some words you would use to describe Tia? How would you describe Miss Hartwell?

Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in developing the roles of the circle members.

- • The **Questioner** might use questions similar to those in the Discussion Questions section of this guide to help group members explore the book.
- • The **Passage Locator** might look for passages that describe Tia's response to music.
- • The **Illustrator** might draw scenes of Tia at home with her family. For example, a picture might show Tia telling her parents and brothers about how she is learning to play the piano.
- • The **Connector** might find out about the lives of some famous African American musicians, or pianists in particular.
- • The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- • The **Investigator** might find out more about the piano as a musical instrument.

*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, sketches, or in oral discussion.

1. What do you think Tia will do next? Will she really learn to play the piano? Do you think she will become a great piano player, as Miss Hartwell suggests?
2. How do you think Tia's family might feel about her job? Why?
3. Why is it important to share things you know and love?
4. Would you have done what Tia did? Why or why not?
5. The **setting** is the time and place in which a story happens. How does the setting of *The Piano* affect the story? How might the story be different if it took place today?

Other Writing Activities

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

1. Suppose Tia wrote a thank you letter to Miss Hartwell. What might she say? Suppose Miss Hartwell wrote a thank you letter back to Tia. What might she say?
2. Write a character sketch of Tia. Explain what kind of person you think she is.
3. Some people say that music is a language of its own. What do you think this means? Why might this be so? Make a list of your thoughts or examples.
4. The story describes some of the images that music brings to Tia. Write a poem about musical images.

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. Invite students to write or dictate questions about the book. Set aside time to help students explore and answer their questions.
2. Read aloud short passages from the story. Point to and explain the illustrations as you read to help students gain meaning.
3. Write the words below on cards. Have students find each word in the story and then identify the item in an illustration in the book.

guitar	overalls	floor	piano	bench
fingers	washcloth	gate	hat	kindling
shoes	mop	salt	windows	eyes

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

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

Music

1. If any students in the class are taking piano or guitar lessons, invite them to play for the rest of the class. Encourage these students to explain how the instrument is played and how it works.
2. Let students explore the makeup and functions of a piano's keys. Have them find out how many keys a piano has, the specific patterns of the keys, why there are white keys and black keys, the different functions of the keys, and so on. If a piano is available to students, they might wish to use it to try out what they learn.
3. If possible, plan a short concert of different kinds of piano music, or arrange for students to attend a nearby concert. If you are planning your own concert, you might include blues, the sounds of Scott Joplin or Fats Waller, and classical pieces such as piano sonatas.

Social Studies

1. *The Piano* offers opportunities to compare daily life in the early 1900s with life one hundred years later in the early 2000s. Have students create and complete **Then and Now** charts. A few examples are shown below. Encourage students to add other items.

THEN	NOW
Cooked on a wood-burning stove	Cook in microwave oven
Listened to records	Listen to CDs
Heated own hot water	Turn on hot water tap

2. Some students might research more about the Jim Crow laws that existed in the South after the Civil War. Ask students to share their information with the class in oral reports.

Language Arts

The Piano focuses on an intergenerational friendship. Ask students to tell about older people/senior citizens with whom they are friends. Then explain that older people often have very interesting stories to tell about their lives, and that an oral history is a record of these stories. Have students work in small groups to recruit a few people who are willing to be interviewed for oral histories. Students should get ready for their interviews by drawing up a list of questions to ask the person, and then preparing to take notes or record the answers. The answers can be written up and/or transcribed and the resulting stories presented to the class. Students may also wish to search the Internet for pictures that relate to the events or places mentioned in their oral histories.

Art

Remind students that music made Tia think of “castles, mountains, and deep new snow.” Talk about how different kinds of music create different mental images. Then play a variety of kinds of music and have students respond by drawing pictures that the music inspires. If students wish, they might share their pictures and describe how the music made them feel.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Miller is the author of numerous award-winning books for young people. In a starred review, *Kirkus Reviews* called *THE PIANO* “a lovely book with an understated message.” The book was also chosen as a Notable Book for a Global Society and a Best Book, K-6 Social Studies, by the Society of School Librarians International. Miller’s books also include the following titles published by Lee & Low Books: *Joe Louis, My Champion, Rent Party Jazz, Night Golf, The Bus Ride, Richard Wright And The Library Card, Frederick Douglass: The Last Day Of Slavery, and Zora Hurston And The Chinaberry Tree*.

Miller was raised in Anniston, Alabama, and now lives in York, Pennsylvania, where he teaches creative writing and African American literature at York College. He says, “Personally, I am drawn to the themes of struggle, renewal, and celebration in the literature I teach.” To write for children on a full-time basis is his goal.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Susan Keeter was “thrilled to have the opportunity to illustrate this book.” She drew on the memory of her grandmother and her grandmother’s home town of Athens, Georgia, to develop a mental picture of the story setting. Kirkus Reviews noted that “Keeter’s oil paintings enhance the gentle mood. Two-page spreads make space for the pictures to illustrate the text and expand the setting.”

Keeter studied fine art and illustration at Syracuse University. She has illustrated several children’s books including *Honey Baby Sugar Child* by Alice Faye Duncan and *Tippy Lemmey* by Patricia C. McKissack. Keeter currently works in marketing and communications at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York, for her “day job.” Keeter lives with her husband, daughter, and three cats in Syracuse.

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about *The Piano* at http://www.leeandlow.com/books/90/hc/the_piano

Also by William Miller

Zora Hurston And The Chinaberry Tree

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/136/hc/zora_hurston_and_the_chinaberry_tree

Zora Hurston And The Chinaberry Tree in Spanish

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/163/hc/zora_hurston_y_el_arbol_sonador

Frederick Douglass: The Last Day Of Slavery

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/51/hc/frederick_douglass_the_last_day_of_slavery

Richard Wright And The Library Card

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/99/hc/richard_wright_and_the_library_card

Richard Wright And The Library Card in Spanish

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/158/hc/richard_wright_y_el_carne_de_biblioteca

The Bus Ride

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/27/hc/the_bus_ride

Rent Party Jazz

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/98/hc/rent_party_jazz

Joe Louis, My Champion

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/70/hc/joe_louis_my_champion

BookTalk with William Miller on *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree*

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

Book Information

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Scholastic Reading Counts!™:3.5

Order Information

On the Web:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/ordering.mhtml> (general order information)

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/90/pb/the_piano (secure online ordering)

By Phone:

212-779-4400 ext. 25

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