



Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grade 3 Interest Level: Grades 1–6 Guided Reading Level: P Accelerated Reader[®] Level/Points: 4.5/0.5 Lexile[™] Measure: 640L

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Entertainment, Music, Dance, Family, Competition, Childhood Experiences and Memories, Overcoming Fears, United States History, Biography (historical fiction), African/African American Interest

Synopsis

Pint-sized dynamo "Baby Florence" Mills was singing and dancing just about as soon as she could talk and walk. She warbled a tune while her mama did laundry, especially the poignant songs her mother knew. Everywhere Flo went, she strutted through the streets of Washington, DC, with a high-steppin' cakewalk.

Baby Flo's family was very poor and lived in Goat Alley, a Washington DC, slum. Baby Flo's mother did laundry for white residents of DC. One day, while Baby Flo was accompanying her mother on a laundry delivery to the butchers on L Street, the butchers requested that Baby Flo sing for them. Her small shop performance stunned them, and soon Baby Flo was making money to help support her family.

Flo's mama and daddy knew they had a budding entertainer in the family, so they entered her in a talent contest. At the age of three, Baby Flo performed at the Bijou Theatre in Washington, DC, but was overcome by stage fright. Flo would eventually go on to become an international superstar during the Harlem Renaissance—but first she had to overcome shyness and discover that winning wasn't everything.

Determined never to let stage fright stand in her way again, Baby Flo worked hard to learn new songs and dances. By age six, she began winning medals for her cakewalk dancing, and her captivating performances attracted fans, including ambassadors and dignitaries. To support Baby Flo's musical pursuits, her mother taught her songs and her father taught her new dances, including the buck-and-wing.

When the African American show *The Sons of Ham* came to town in 1903, Baby Flo competed in a buck-and-wing dance act. Her performance did not earn her first place, but did catch the eye of the Empire Theatre's manager, who hired her to perform at every intermission of the show. Flo's name even appeared on the front of the theater in lights, much to the delight of Flo and her father.

This is the spirited story of a spunky young girl learning to chase her dreams with confidence. A sensation in her time, Baby Flo is back, dancing and singing her way into hearts and history.

BACKGROUND

Florence Mills (from Author's Note): Baby Flo was born in 1896 in Washington, DC. Her parents soon realized Florence had a natural talent for song and dance, and she made her stage debut at age 3 in 1899. Florence went on to perform for local politicians and ambassadors, to compete in numerous dance competitions, and eventually to be invited to dance and sing for a week as part of the popular black show *The Sons of Ham*. Later, she and her sisters performed a vaudeville act as The Mills Sisters, and in 1917 she joined a vaudeville group, the Tennessee Ten. It was here that Florence met U. S. Thompson, whom she married in 1921. Because of her race and despite her international success, Baby Flo faced segregated trains, rundown theatres, and stingy managers.

Florence later landed a role in the Broadway musical *Shuffle Along*, which is credited as being one of the key events that ushered in the Harlem Renaissance. She was immensely popular in Europe and her fans included many contemporaries, including Charlie Chaplin, Duke Ellington, Paul Robeson, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and Irving Berlin. On November 1, 1927, at the age of thirty-one, Florence Mills died from surgery complications after battling tuberculosis. No one has discovered film footage and there are no recordings of her songs. In 1943, Duke Ellington dedicated his song "Black Beauty" to Florence Mills. For more information about Florence Mills, check out Lee & Low's interview with author Alan Schroeder.¹

Historical Accuracy (from Author's Note): Reliable information about Florence Mills's early years is limited, and some details and dialogue have been imagined for storytelling purposes. In the interest of accuracy, it should be noted that Florence's vocal debut took place not in a butcher shop, as portrayed here, but in a less savory establishment. The stage name of "Mills," incidentally, was given to Florence when she was four years old. Her parents presumably did not think a black woman could make it in show business with the last name of Winfrey!

Cakewalk Dance: The dance style originated on Southern plantations and involves a male/female couple. Enslaved people developed the cakewalk dance to mock plantation

¹ http://www.leeandlow.com/p/alan_schroeder_bt.mhtml

owners and white upper classes.² According to the blog *Edwardian Promenade*, the dance was adopted into minstrel shows and eventually lost its satire. Instead of making fun of pompous ballroom dancers, the exaggerated style of the cakewalk was perceived by audiences as African Americans attempting to emulate whites. Later, leading up to the early jazz period and Harlem Renaissance, a few African American dancers attempted to reclaim the cakewalk and elevate its stature among white and African American audiences. The cakewalk is credited with being the first crossover dance from African Americans to white culture. For more information on the history of the cakewalk dance, check out the <u>blog *Edwardian Promenade*</u>.³ *Slate* magazine also offers an in-depth explanation on the origins of how "cakewalk" became synonymous with "easy."⁴ For an example of the dance steps, the Library Congress has posted a <u>cakewalk performance recorded in 1903</u>.⁵

Buck-and-Wing Dance: This is a solo dance style and type of tap dancing that began circa nineteenth century. It was also popular in minstrel and vaudeville performances. Buck-and-wing dancing originated in Europe as British and Irish clogging, but evolved into a distinct dance form in North America. African American dancers fused the clogging steps with African American rhythms and footwork. For a history of tap-dancing in North America, be sure to check out <u>TheatreDance.com.</u>⁶ PBS also has a three-part documentary on the impact of African American dance on American culture with a powerful essay, <u>"From Slave Ships to Center Stage,"</u> that chronicles African American dance forms in early American history.⁷ Finally, Duke University's Professor <u>Thomas F. DeFrantz demonstrates the "buck-and-wing"</u> and other nineteenth century African American dances.⁸

Segregation of African American Performers and Audiences: Outright racial segregation occurred in all parts of society in the United States through the 1960s, including housing, education, politics, food service, and entertainment. It was "a system derived from the efforts of white Americans to keep African Americans in a subordinate status by denying them equal access to public facilities and ensuring that blacks lived apart from whites" as defined by <u>Steven F. Lawson of Rutgers University</u>.⁹ Minstrel and vaudeville shows opened up pathways for African Americans to perform on stage, and later African Americans were able to claim the stage in new, bolder, and more empowered art forms. However, even African American entertainers who were popular among both black and white audiences in the early twentieth century faced severe segregation off stage and after shows, including being denied access to restaurants, hotels, sleeping cars on trains, and theater after-parties.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7) Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background knowledge and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

² http://www.britannica.com/blackhistory/article-9018592

³ http://www.edwardianpromenade.com/amusements/the-cakewalk/

⁴ http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/explainer/2003/04/where_do_cakewalks_come_from.html

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QifiyNm6jG4

⁶ http://www.theatredance.com/tap/

⁷ http://www.pbs.org/wnet/freetodance/behind/behind_slaveships.html

⁸ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A34OD4eA17o

⁹ http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1865-1917/essays/segregation.htm

- 1. Take a look at the front and back cover. Take a picture walk. Ask students to make a prediction. Do you think this book will be fiction or nonfiction? What makes you think so? What clues do the author and illustrator give to help you know whether this book will be fiction or nonfiction?
- 2. What do you know about stories that are biographies? What kinds of things happen in biographies? What are some things that will not happen in biographies? Why do authors write biographies? How do you think their reasons different from authors who write fiction? What are some of the characteristics of a biography?
- 3. What do you know about segregation in the United States in the early 1900s? How might segregation affect our main character, Baby Flo?
- 4. What did people do for fun and entertainment in the early 1900s? What is it like to go to a show at a theater? How would you describe the stage and audience's seats? What plays or performances have you seen? How is a theater where you see plays different from a movie theater?
- 5. Why do people like to dance? What are some popular dances today? What are some ways your body moves when you dance? Who are some famous dancers today?
- 6. Have you ever performed in front of an audience? How does it feel to be in front of a group of people? What advice would you give someone who is shy or scared?
- 7. Why do you think I chose this book for us to read today?

Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1, and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

Read and talk about the title of the book. (You might also want to read students the subtitle that appears on the first page of the book.) Ask students what they think the title means. Then ask them what they think this book will most likely be about and who the book might be about. What places might be talked about in the text? What do you think might happen? What information do you think you might learn? What makes you think that?

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: front and back covers, title page, dedications and front author's note, text, illustrations, and author's note with photographs.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

Have students read to find out who Baby Flo was, why she was an important person in United States history, and how she became a famous entertainer. Encourage students to consider why the author, Alan Schroeder, would want to share this story with young readers.

VOCABULARY

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below. Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

CONTENT SPECIFIC

coal marquee pint-sized wide-eyed	washerwoman buck-and-wing harmonica vaudeville	bleach shuffle in the wings	cakewalk emcee drumroll	"dance the pants off" ladies and gents backstage	
ACADEMIC remarkable discouraged astonishment intermission peppy	budge manager prancing retrieved folks	bare career doubtful strutted	pipe right up lullaby ambassador sensational	tune slew thrilled disappointed	in public elegant fancy scoffed

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite evidence with their answers.**

	Literal Comprehension
	ading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1 and 3)
1.	What did you learn about Goat Alley in Washington, DC? What hardships did Florence face at home?
2.	Talk about the first time Florence sang in public. For whom did she sing? How did people react? Why did they react that way?
3.	What was so important about Florence's performance at the butcher shop? What idea did her mother get from their visit?
4.	How did her parents help Florence?
5.	How did Florence help her family?
6.	Describe the first time Florence sang at the Bijou Theatre. What happened? How did she feel. How did she handle singing for a crowd? How did the crowd react to her?
7.	How does Florence's father feel about her and her talents? What does he tell her that shows this?
8.	What was <i>The Sons of Ham</i> ? Why was this dance contest a big deal? What did Florence do to prepare?
9.	How did Florence learn the buck-and-wing dance?
	How did the contest end? How did Florence feel about the result? How did her father feel? How did the theater manager feel? How do you know?
11.	How much money was Florence offered to be part of <i>The Sons of Ham</i> ? Explain why this was an important accomplishment for Florence.
12.	What else happened when Florence got this performance opportunity? Why was this important?
13.	What were Baby Flo and her father excited to see at the end of the story? Why?

Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strand 6)

1. Why did Florence's mother agree to wash other people's clothes? Why did she have to use lots of bleach and scrub hard when she washed clothes like the butchers' aprons? What does this tell you about Florence's family?

- 2. How did Florence's parents feel about her special talents? How do you know?
- 3. What did the minister mean when he said, "I believe the devil's in your feet!"? How do you know? Why would he say that?
- 4. Why was the shiny bracelet important to Florence? How did she behave that let us know the bracelet was important to her?
- 5. How did Florence's parents encourage her? How do you think they felt when they saw her perform? Why would they want her to become an entertainer?
- 6. What does it mean to have your name on the marquee of a theater? Why was that an important goal for Florence?
- 7. How did Florence feel about competing in *The Sons of Ham* contest? How do you know? What did she ask her father that showed she felt this way? How was this contest different from other contests in which she had competed?
- 8. What is the theme/author's message of the story? What does the author, Alan Schroeder, want you to learn through Florence Mills' story? Why is Florence Mills a good role model?
- 9. Before Florence Mills became a famous entertainer, she had to overcome several obstacles. What obstacles did she face? How did she overcome them?
- 10. How would the story be different if Florence's parents weren't supportive of her dream or weren't available to help her? Do you think she would have been able to achieve success on her own? Why or why not?
- 11. Text-to-Text and Text-to-World Connections: Which other characters or real-life famous people does Florence Mills remind you of? How are their stories similar? How are their stories different?
- 12. Florence's parents changed her last name from Winfrey to Mills? How did they think the new name would that make a difference? What does this suggest about the times she lived in?
- 13. Why did the manager pick Florence to perform at *The Sons of Ham* intermission even though she didn't win first place in the contest?
- 14. How does this story teach about persistence and confidence?

Literature Circles

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

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 the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines in the story that explain new vocabulary words.
- The **Illustrator** might illustrate a scene from Florence Mills' life that is not already illustrated in the book.
- The **Connector** might find other books written about famous actors and actresses who were performing during the same time period as Florence Mills.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of each part of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might look for information about other African American women performers of the first half of the twentieth century.

*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

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6) (Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3, Craft & Structure, Strands 4–6, and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9)

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's response journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also wish to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

- 1. Read the author's note at the end of the story with students. What were some of the challenges Florence Mills faced as an adult trying to make a name for herself in show business? How did some people treat her? Was this fair? Why or why not? Why are Florence Mills' accomplishments remarkable? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
- 2. Which parts of the story did you connect to the most? Why? Was there ever a time you doubted yourself or were shy? How did you overcome it? Who helped you practice and believe in yourself? What advice would you give to someone who is feeling shy or who doesn't have confidence in himself or herself?
- 3. What are some of the challenges that come with being a performer? What are some of the advantages? Is this a career you would want? Why or why not?
- 4. In the book, Florence's parents are huge influences and factors in her success as an entertainer. Write about someone in your life who helps, encourages, or practices with you. How does that person make you feel? How have they helped you overcome your fears or a tough situation? Why do you think everyone needs someone who believes in him or her?
- 5. Have students write a book recommendation for *Baby Flo* explaining why they would or would not recommend this book to other students.

ELL Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners.

- 1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader. Students who speak Spanish can help with the pronunciations of the Spanish words and terms in the book.
- 2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
- Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
 Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.

• Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.

4. Have students give a short talk about what they admire about a character or central figure in the story.

5. The story contains several content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Student who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably) Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

Social Studies

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

- Ask students to research other famous African American performers from that early to mid 1900s. (e.g.: Duke Ellington, Paul Robeson, and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson; they are all referenced in the Author's Note). What were their lives like? How did they break into show business? What challenges and unfair treatment did they face due to the color of their skin? How did they overcome the challenges they faced? What contributions did they make to United States history and culture?
- 2. Invite students to research their city, a city near them, or Washington DC (where the story takes place) in the early 1900s. What was the city like a hundred years ago? What did people do for fun? What were popular jobs and occupations? Where did people live? What was school like? How were different groups of people treated? Compare and contrast the daily life and amenities to life today. How has the city changed?
- 3. Ask students to research current laws governing the employment of children in the United States. At what age are children allowed to work for pay? When are they not permitted to work? How many school absences can they take for work? How much should children get paid for their work? Why are there laws governing children's employment? Do you think the laws are fair? Why or why not? How do the laws protect children? How are employment laws in entertainment, agricultural work, and other industries different from and similar to each other? To investigate these questions, check out the Department of Labor.¹⁰

Math

(Mathematics Standards, Grade 2, Measurement & Data, Strand 7–8) (Mathematics Standards, Grade 2, Operations & Algebraic Thinking, Strand 1) (Mathematics Standards, Grade 3, Operations & Algebraic Thinking, Strand 3 and 8)

 This book has several money references because Baby Flo quickly earned money for her street performances and contests. Use some of the scenes in the book to review the values of currency. For example, what is a dime? How much is it worth? How many pennies do you need to equal the value of a dime? How many nickels do you need to equal the value of a dime?

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¹⁰ http://www.dol.gov/whd/state/state.htm

- 2. After her performance in the butchers' shop, Florence earned \$3.85. How many different ways can you make \$3.85 using combinations of quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies?
- 3. *Baby Flo* also lends itself to word problems. For example, Florence was promised twenty-five cents a night to perform at the Empire Theatre. If she performed every night for one week, how much money did she earn? How much would she earn in two weeks? Three weeks? And so on.
- 4. Today there are laws that protect children who perform onstage to help make sure they aren't underpaid for their work and aren't working instead of going to school. If Baby Florence Mills was performing today, she may have earned at least \$50.00 an hour. If she performed seven hours in one week, how much money would Florence have earned? How much more money would she earn today than in the early 1900s?

Physical Education/Music

- 1. Ask students to research the famous dances Florence Mills performed, as mentioned in the book: the cakewalk and the buck-and-wing. Ask students to research music that was popular at the time when Florence Mills was performing, as well as the two songs Florence sang for the butchers. Have students work together in groups to perform these dances to music from the era and to share the songs with their classmates. See the Background section of this teachers' guide for more information on the cakewalk and buck-and-wing dances. For a sample of the dance steps, the Library Congress has posted a <u>cakewalk performance recorded in 1903</u>.¹¹ Duke University's Professor <u>Thomas F. DeFrantz demonstrates the "buck-and-wing"</u> and other nineteenth century African American dances.¹²
- 2. Have students compare and contrast the cakewalk or buck-and-wing steps to a modern-day dance. Where did the dances originate? What makes them special? How are the dances similar? How are they different?
- 3. Invite small groups of students to create their own dances, make up new moves, name their dances, and teach them to their classmates. During recess or after school, allow students to host a small talent show for their classmates or other students in the school.

Home-School Connection

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9) (Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3) (Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2 and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strand 7)

- 1. Encourage students to interview their parents, grandparents, or guardians. When was a time they felt shy or experienced stage fright? What caused them to feel that way? How did they overcome these feelings? What advice do they have for someone who is experiencing stage fright?
- 2. Encourage students to interview their parents, grandparents, or guardians. Ask them to describe a time when they performed in front of a large crowd. What activity were they doing (sports, art, music, theater, comedy, debate, dance, etc.)? How did they prepare and practice? Who helped them practice? How did their families feel when they performed? How did they themselves feel about the whole experience?
- 3. Encourage students to interview their parents, grandparents, or guardians. When was there a time they experienced prejudice or witnessed prejudice toward someone else? How did it make them feel? How did they overcome that obstacle? What

¹¹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QifiyNm6jG4

¹² http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A34OD4eA17o

changes have they seen since they were younger or hope to see in the future to make the world a fairer, more just place?

- 4. Invite students to work with their parents, grandparents, or guardians to research other famous child entertainers of today or from years past. What was that child star famous for? What challenges did she or he face? What happened to her or him when she or he grew up? What legacy did the entertainer leave behind?
- 5. Have students document a song or dance on video that their parents, grandparents, or guardians teach them. With the adults' permission, allow students to share the song or dance in class and teach the steps or words to classmates.
- 6. In the story, Florence's parents are huge influences and factors in her success as an entertainer. Have students write about someone in their lives who helps, encourages, or practices with them. How does that person make them feel? How has that person helped them overcome their fears or a tough situation? Ask students why they think everyone needs someone who believes in them?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Schroeder is the author of several acclaimed picture books that recount the early lives of notable African Americans. His work has earned ALA Notable Books citations and has been honored among *TIME* magazine's Best Children's Books of the Year. Schroeder lives in Alameda, California.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATORS

Cornelius Van Wright and **Ying-Hwa Hu**, a husband-and-wife creative team, have illustrated dozens of award-winning books. Their illustrations have been praised by *Kirkus Reviews* as "bright, detailed and dynamic, vividly depicting . . . characters' facial features and personalities." Van Wright and Hu live in New York City. They can be found online at www.pencilmoonstudio.com.

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Guided Reading Level: P
Accelerated Reader[®] Level/Points: 4.5/0.5
Lexile[™] Measure: 640L

Themes: Entertainment, Music, Dance, Family, Competition, Childhood Experiences and Memories, Overcoming Fears, United States History, Biography (historical fiction), African/African American Interest

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about Baby Flo at: https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2767

Order Information On the Web:

http://www.leeandlow.com (general order information) https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2767 (secure online ordering) **By Phone:** 212-779-4400 ext. 25 212-683-1894 fax **By Mail:** Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue, NY, NY 10016

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