



**Classroom Guide for
LOVE TO LANGSTON**
by Tony Medina
illustrated by R. Gregory Christie

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grade 2

Interest Level: Grades 1–6

Guided Reading Level: S

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.5/.5

Lexile™ Measure: NP (non-prose text)

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Urban Life, Feelings, Prejudice, American History, African American Interest, Poetry

National Standards

SOCIAL STUDIES: Culture; People, Places, and Environments; Individual Development and Identity; Power, Authority, and Governance

LANGUAGE ARTS: Reading for Perspective; Understanding the Human Experience; Multicultural Understanding; Applying Non-English Perspectives

Synopsis

This biography in poems was published in 2002 in honor of the well-known American poet Langston Hughes (1902–1967) on the anniversary of his 100th birthday. Each poem explores a significant event or theme in the life of Hughes. Young readers learn about his lonely childhood, the racism he faced, his decision to become a writer, his years of travel, his love of New York's Harlem neighborhood, and his success as a poet. Tony Medina has written the fourteen poems in this book “through his (Hughes’) voice as I would imagine it.”

Background

In his Introduction, Tony Medina says that *Selected Poems* by Langston Hughes was one of the first poetry books he ever read. Medina writes, "When I opened the book, a whole world of familiar voices and scenes came to life. Langston was painting my world with words both plainspoken and lyrically sweet and sassy." To Medina, Hughes was a poet of the people who "celebrated the beauty of black life" and whose poetry, plays, novels, magazine articles, and short stories "expressed his lifelong commitment to justice and equality."

Extensive notes for each poem at the back of the book combine to provide a more detailed biography of Langston Hughes' life.

Teaching Tip

You may want to feature this book as part of your celebration of Black History Month in February.

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. How would you honor someone you thought was really special?
2. Who is your favorite writer? Has that writer influenced you in some way? How?
3. What kinds of poetry do you enjoy? What is your favorite poem? Why do you like it?
4. How do you show what you are feeling or thinking? Do you ever express yourself through art, stories, dance, or poems? How do these forms of expression help you communicate with others?
5. When something is unjust, what could you say or do about it?

Exploring the Book

Display the front cover of the book and read the title aloud. Ask students why they think the author chose this title.

Discuss the front cover illustration. Invite students to comment on it and talk about who is shown, where it might be, and why the illustrator chose this scene.

Show the photograph on the back cover and explain that it shows Langston Hughes, a well-known poet, signing autographs for young people.

Invite students to leaf through the book. Draw attention to the inside jacket blurb, introduction by Tony Medina, the two dedications, and the notes at the back of the book. Plan to share these notes with students before or after they read the book.

Point out the titles of the poems and remind students to use these as they read to gain meaning.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to find out about the life and work of Langston Hughes.

Review with students that poems can take many forms and that not all poems rhyme. Point out that poets use words in different and unique ways to share their messages and feelings. Tell students they will be able to learn more about some of the ways that poets present ideas from this book.

Discuss with students some of the other things they anticipate learning from this book based on their observations so far.

Teaching Tip

Some of the poems use nonstandard English. Explain beforehand to students that poets often use what is called “poetic license” to achieve a certain effect or feeling, as the author does in this book. Point out that poets sometimes do not use capital letters or punctuation for the same reason.

Vocabulary

Explain that Harlem is a neighborhood in New York City. Then write the following words on the chalkboard. Tell students that the words are all related to Harlem, especially during the period of the Harlem Renaissance (the early decades of the twentieth century) when Langston Hughes lived in Harlem. Have students look up the words in a dictionary and record their dictionary meanings. Then have students refer to the poems and other sources to figure out the particular meanings of the words relating to Harlem.

blues	soul	boulevard	pride	cabaret
strife	community	blackness	nightclub	jazz
urban	spiritual	stride	concrete	bruised

AFTER READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion Questions

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

1. Who is the speaker in these poems? What makes you think so?
2. How is the poem “Little Boy Blues” like the Mother Goose rhyme “Little Boy Blue”?
3. In “Grandma’s Stories,” why does the grandmother tell these tales?
4. How do both the teacher and mother act in “First Grade”? Why does each act that way?
5. What is the Jim Crow Row? How do the black students feel about it? What do they do?

6. In the poem "Libraries," what makes these places special?
7. What is the speaker referring to in the last verse of "In High School"?
8. What is the problem between father and son in "I Do Not Like My Father Much"?
9. Why does the speaker throw books overboard in "Leaving Harlem for Africa"?
10. In "All My Life," what does the speaker learn through his travels?
11. Read "Harlem Is the Capital of My World." Why is Harlem so important to the speaker?
12. How do jazz and the blues affect the speaker in "Jazz Makes Me Sing"?
13. What does the speaker think words are for in "Poetry Means the World to Me"?
14. How do the oranges affect the speaker in "A Bag of Oranges"?
15. In "Sometimes Life Ain't Always a Hoot," how does the speaker view life?

Literature Circles*

If you are using 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 lines in the poems that express the speaker's feelings.
- The **Illustrator** might draw pictures showing his or her personal interpretations of one or more of the poems, or choose to highlight parts of the poems other than those the illustrator showed.
- The **Connector** might find and share poems, songs, or stories by other writers of the Harlem Renaissance.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of each poem for the group.
- The **Investigator** might find poems written by Langston Hughes to share.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Two such books you may wish to refer to are: *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 1994) 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. Reread the poems. Which ones suggest joy? Sadness? Pride? Other emotions? What were the circumstances that elicited these feelings?

2. Which poem in the book is your favorite? Why?
3. What kind of person do you think Langston Hughes was? What parts of the poems make you think so?
4. Reread the poem "Poetry Means the World to Me." What means the world to you? Why?

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. Have students find out about the Jim Crow laws and write a report about them.
2. Introduce or review similes and metaphors. Explain that similes compare unlike things and contain the words *like* or *as*. Give as an example this simile from "Leaving Harlem for Africa": *I am letting go of my past like tears dropped from my face one by one.* Explain that metaphors are comparisons made without the use of *like* or *as*. Give as an example this metaphor from "Harlem Is the Capital of My World": *Harlem is a bouquet of black roses.* Then challenge students to write similes and metaphors of their own.
3. Ask students to reread the poem "Libraries," then write their own poems about places that are special to them. Encourage students to include similes and or metaphors in their poems.

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 strong readers make tape recordings of the poems. ELL/ESL students can follow along in the book as they listen to the poems.
2. Preteach key English vocabulary to help keep English language learners focused on the poems. Post these essential words on the chalkboard.
3. Pair strong English speakers with ELL/ESL partners to help explain the poems and word meanings as they read the poems together.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

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

Social Studies

1. Use the poems and notes in *Love to Langston*, along with other resources, to make a timeline of Langston Hughes' life. In addition to the events covered in the book, students might include his birth, death, college years, and significant highlights in his writing career.

2. Use maps to help students locate the places mentioned in the poems. For example, students might look for Lawrence, Kansas; Cleveland, Ohio; and Topeka, Kansas, on a map of the United States. On a world map, have them locate Africa and countries such as Russia, Poland, Italy, Hungary, Mexico, and China. On a map of New York City, find Harlem, the East River, the Hudson River, and St. Nicholas Avenue.
3. Several historical periods, people, and events are referred to in the poems. The Underground Railroad and John Brown/Harpers Ferry are mentioned in "Grandma's Stories." Jim Crow laws are alluded to in "Jim Crow Row." Duke Ellington is mentioned and the Harlem Renaissance is alluded to in "Harlem Is the Capital of My World." Alice Walker is mentioned in "A Bag of Oranges." Have students work in pairs to research information about these items as well as others alluded to in the poems, and encourage them to report their findings to the class using whatever media they think are appropriate. Interested students might also find out about Hughes' home in Harlem, which is a historical landmark, and the Langston Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center in Queens, New York.

Language Arts

1. The poems in this book offer a good opportunity to teach students about poetic devices. Introduce and discuss the following:
 - **Repetition:** Have students note the repeating lines in "Little Boy Blues." Ask them to find other examples of repetition in the book, such as in "First Grade."
 - **Onomatopoeia:** Have students identify the words in "Jazz Makes Me Sing" that represent the music.
 - **Personification:** Ask students to find the lines in "Leaving Harlem for Africa" that suggest the sea is a live creature.
 - **Alliteration:** Direct students to the last lines of "Sometimes Life Ain't Always a Hoot."
 - **Rhythm:** Have students read the last verse of "In High School" aloud to hear the rhythm.
2. Set up a poetry corner in your classroom. Include books of poems and displays of the work of Langston Hughes and Alice Walker. Also place an empty notebook in the area and encourage students to add their own poems.

Music

Play selections of blues and jazz music for the class. Introduce students to the work of James Hubert "Eubie" Blake, Bessie Smith, Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, W. C. Handy, and Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington. Encourage students to talk about how they respond to the various pieces and how they make them feel.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

Tony Medina grew up in the projects in the South Bronx of New York City. He graduated from Baruch College with a B.A. in literature, taught English at Long Island University, and then went on to earn masters and doctorate degrees. Of Black Puerto Rican descent, Medina was chosen by *Writer's Digest* as one of the top ten poets to watch in the new millennium. In addition to *Love To Langston*, Medina has written

DeShawn Days and *Christmas Makes Me Think*, and contributed to the poetry collection *Love To Mamá: A Tribute To Mothers*. As an advocate for literacy among today's youth, Medina emphasizes not only the importance of being able to read, but of loving to read. Medina has also written extensively for adult audiences, including four poetry collections.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

R. Gregory Christie is a three-time winner of the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award Honor for his books *The Palm Of My Heart* and *Brothers In Hope*, published by Lee & Low Books, and *Only Passing Through*. He was born and raised in New Jersey and received his fine arts degree from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Christie's artwork has appeared in numerous commercial publications, including *The New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, *The New Yorker*, *Parenting* magazine, and on many CD album covers. Other books he has illustrated for Lee & Low include *Richard Wright And The Library Card* and *DeShawn Days*.

LOVE TO LANGSTON received starred reviews from *School Library Journal* and *Kirkus Reviews*, as well as many other awards and honors. These include:

- Best Books, *School Library Journal*
- Notable Children's Book in the English Language Arts, NCTE
- 100 Titles for Reading and Sharing, New York Public Library
- Bank Street Bookstore Bestseller List
- Original Art Show, Society of Illustrators
- Chapman Award, Best Classroom Read Aloud, *PlanetEsme.com*

Resources on the Web

Learn more about ***Love to Langston*** at:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/81/hc/love_to_langston

Also by Tony Medina, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie ***DeShawn Days***

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/41/hc/deshawn_days

Also by Tony Medina ***Christmas Makes Me Think***

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/34/hc/christmas_makes_me_think

Also by Tony Medina, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie ***Brothers in Hope***

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/26/hc/brothers_in_hope_the_story_of_the_lost_boys_of_sudan

The Palm of My Heart

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/88/hc/the_palm_of_my_heart_poetry_by_african_american_children

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

Active Reader Classroom Guides

http://www.leeandlow.com/p/teachers-african_american.mhtml

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Lexile Measure®: NP

Scholastic Reading Counts!™: 3.7

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