



Classroom Guide for **CHILDREN OF LONG AGO**

poems by **Lessie Jones Little**
illustrated by **Jan Spivey Gilchrist**
introduction by **Eloise Greenfield**

Reading Levels

*Reading Level: Grade 2
Interest Level: Grades PREK–4
Guided Reading Level: M
Scholastic Reading Counts!™: 2.5
Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.3/.5

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Poetry/Verse, Family Traditions, History, Early Childhood, African American Experience

National Standards

SOCIAL STUDIES: Culture; Time, Continuity, and Change; People, Places, and Environments
LANGUAGE ARTS: Reading for Perspective; Understanding the Human Experience; Multicultural Understanding

In this book Lessie Jones Little uses poetry to recall her childhood in the early part of the twentieth century in rural North Carolina. Like the soft pastels of the book's illustrations, the poems are created in warm tones and evoke pleasant memories of a child's daily life. Universal topics such as family life, chores, and play are featured in many of the verses, and as Lucille Clifton pointed out in *The New York Times Book Review*: "What is important is that few if any other books describing those experiences have been about black children." *Children of Long Ago* is a Parents' Choice Award winner and is listed as a "Choices" selection by the Cooperative Children's Book Council at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Background

Lessie Jones Little was born in Parmele, North Carolina, in 1906 and died in 1986, before publication of this book. Little began writing in her late sixties and continued to write for the rest of her life. She was also the mother of the award-winning children's book author and poet, Eloise Greenfield, with whom she co-authored two children's

books, *I Can Do It By Myself* and *Childtimes: A Three-Generation Memoir*. *Children of Long Ago*, a collection of seventeen poems, was first published in 1988 and was reissued in 2000 using the original illustrations.

Although Little grew up in the segregated South, she experienced the warmth of growing up in a loving family, and this is reflected in her poetry. As Greenfield says in the new introduction to the book, her mother “mixed her memories and her imagination to create children growing up during the time of her childhood.” Although Mrs. Little didn’t live to see the book’s illustrations, Greenfield assures us that her mother “loved beautiful art.”

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before introducing the book, you may wish to have students discuss one or more of the following questions to develop background and set the stage for reading.

1. Do the grownups in your family tell stories about “long ago”? What stories do they tell?
2. What are some of your own favorite memories? What are some ways you can share them with other children or adults?
3. Why are memories important?
4. Do you have a favorite poem? What is it?
5. What do you like about poetry? What makes poetry different from a story?
6. How do you think life long ago differed from your life today?

Teaching Tip

Plan to use *Children of Long Ago* during April as part of your celebration of National Poetry Month.

Exploring the Book

Display the front cover of the book and read aloud the title. Invite students to comment on what the girls in the illustration are doing. What kind of mood or tone does the illustration suggest?

Invite students to leaf through the book. Draw attention to the inside book blurb, the introduction by Eloise Greenfield, and the two dedications. Also point out the titles of the poems and remind students to use these as they read to gain meaning.

Encourage students to study the illustrations. Can they figure out what medium the artist used? Explain that the pictures are done in pastel, a kind of colored chalk.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

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 memories. Tell students that they will be able to learn about some of the ways poets present ideas from this book.

Discuss with students some of the other things they might learn from this book. If necessary, reread the book's title to guide students' thinking.

Vocabulary

Help students appreciate and understand the poet's use of words by having volunteers act out verbs from the book. Read aloud lines such as the following and emphasize the underlined verbs.

From the first poem, "Children of Long Ago":
Tromped to school on hard-frozen roads
Decked themselves in their Sunday best

From "All Dressed Up":
And strut to church when the church bell rings

From "Reading Glasses":
About frisky snowflakes romping above

From "Wait Little Joe":
So he pitched himself as far as he could go

From "Papa's Cutting Wood":
His muscles balloon

From "Mama's Grandpa Clock":
As I snuggle under the cover

From "Baby Gail":
And make your body spring

From "My Black Hen":
And I talk as I stoop down

As you work through the book, compile a list of rhyming words on a chart or poster pad. Encourage students to add more words that they know to each group of rhymes.

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the poems, use these or similar questions to help students deepen their understanding of the selections. Encourage students to identify specific lines in the poems or particular illustrations to support their responses.

1. How did people dress long ago?
2. In the first poem of the book, "Children of Long Ago," it says the children "traveled through books for sights and sounds." What does this mean?
3. In the poem "Bells," what are some of the ways bells help people?
4. Who is the speaker in the poem "Reading Glasses"?

5. In “Paper Dolls,” why does the speaker say “we’ll eat their meal”?
6. In the poem “Papa’s Cutting Wood,” why is Papa cutting wood?
7. Who are some of the family members mentioned in the poems?
8. Why is Sunday important to the poet?
9. How does a poem paint a picture?
10. What do these poems tell you about the poet?

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 Question section of this guide to help group members explore the poems.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines or phrases that reveal certain feelings such as happiness or pride.
- The **Illustrator** might draw pictures showing his or her personal interpretation of one or more of the poems.
- The **Connector** might find examples of poems written by the poet’s daughter, Eloise Greenfield.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of each poem for the group.
- The **Investigator** might find additional poems about long ago times.

*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 their responses to what they have read. Encourage students to keep reader’s response journals as a way of engaging with the poems and focusing their thoughts.

1. Which is your favorite poem in this book? Why?
2. In “Reading Glasses,” the poet asks her Grandma to read to her. Who reads to you? When? Do you read to someone too? Describe the experience(s).
3. Which of the games or activities mentioned in the poems have you played or done? Describe how you did them and whether or not your experience is different from the way the games or activities are described in the poems.

Other Writing Activities

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

1. Have students write a story about a child of long ago. Encourage the use of details from the poems.
2. Introduce similes to the class and explain that these comparisons of unlike things are characterized by the words “like” or “as.” Give as an example this simile from “Children of Long Ago”: BUILT FANCY SNOWMEN DRESSED LIKE CLOWNS. Then challenge students to write five similes of their own.
3. Remind students that April is National Poetry Month. Encourage them to write their own poems on a topic of their choice.

ELL/ESL Teaching Activities

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 and ESL students can follow along in the book as they listen to the poems.
2. Pair strong English speakers with English language learners as partners. Have the English speakers use the acting out activities given in the Vocabulary section of this guide to illustrate meanings.
3. Use the last poem in the book, “Children of Long Ago,” as the basis for a chart to help students compare children of long with children of today. Help students find examples from the book for the categories in the past. For instance, for “They cried” you might look at the poem “Wait Little Joe” and talk about why he would cry. Then have students think of something that would upset them in a similar way.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

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

Social Studies

Suggest that students make a timeline showing a day in the life of a child at the turn of the last century. Explain that students should base their timeline on information they find in the poems, along with other information they gather through research.

Language Arts

The poems in this book offer a good opportunity to teach students about different poetic devices. Introduce and discuss the following:

Repetition: Have students note how the first two lines and the last line of each verse in the first poem, “Children of Long Ago,” are repeated.

Onomatopoeia: Have students identify the words that sound like bells in “All Dressed Up.”

Personification: Ask students to find the lines that describe Grandma’s eyeglasses as if they were a human being in “Reading Glasses.”

Alliteration: Have students find words that begin with the same sounds in the poem “Going to Sunday School.”

Metaphor: Ask students to tell what the poet calls the corn leaves in “Cornfield Leaves.”

Art

1. Remind students that one of the poems in the book is called “Paper Dolls.” After rereading the poem, have students make their own paper dolls from oak tag. Demonstrate how to add a stand to keep the dolls upright. Students can then design clothes for their dolls. Suggest that they make one outfit representing long ago and another outfit representing today.
2. For future art projects, some students might enjoy working in pastels as the illustrator Jan Spivey Gilchrist did for the pictures in *Children of Long Ago*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lessie Jones Little (1906–1986) was born in Parmele, North Carolina. She graduated from high school in 1924 and began teaching in the state’s public school system. After marrying her childhood sweetheart, Little moved with him to Washington, D.C. In addition to mothering five children, Little studied sewing and became a seamstress. She later worked for the U.S. government as a clerk. Her interests ranged from music, drawing, and the piano to working with children in neighborhood and church programs. In the 1970s Little became interested in writing and began attending workshops. With her daughter Eloise Greenfield, Lessie Jones Little co-authored two books. One of these, *Childtimes: A Three-Generation Memoir*, was a Coretta Scott King Author Award and a *Boston Globe/Horn Book* Honor Book.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Jan Spivey Gilchrist is an award-winning artist whose first book was *Children of Long Ago*. Since that time she has illustrated more than forty books including many by Eloise Greenfield. Gilchrist has also authored several of her own books. She is a graduate of Eastern Illinois University and has a masters in painting from the University of Northern Iowa. Gilchrist was born in Chicago and now lives in a nearby suburb.

Resources on the Web

Learn more about *Children of Long Ago*

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/33/pb/children_of_long_ago

Also illustrated by Jan Spivey Gilchrist, **When the Horses Ride By:**

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/131/hc/when_the_horses Ride_by_children_in_the_times_of_war

View other **Active Reader Classroom Guides** at:

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

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Order Information

On the Web:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/33/pb/children_of_long_ago (secure on-line ordering)

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

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