



Classroom Guide for
IN DADDY'S ARMS I AM TALL
African Americans Celebrating Fathers
 Illustrated by **Javaka Steptoe**

Reading Level

Interest Level: Grades 1-6

Reading Level: Grades 2-3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.1

Lexile Measure®: NP

Scholastic Reading Counts!™: 2.8

Themes

Fatherhood, Family, Respect, Heritage, Poetry

Synopsis

The 12 poems in this book deliver an important message to all readers about the powerful bonds between fathers, children, and grandchildren. Exuberance, grace, honor, pain, and humor all have their place in these intergenerational works. The poems reflect the contributions of both new and established African American writers whose outlooks on fatherhood vary widely. Six of the poets are women, six are men.

The innovative and award-winning illustrations by Javaka Steptoe bring the poems to life and support the potpourri of voices resonating throughout the book. In a starred review, *Publishers Weekly* described Javaka Steptoe's stunning collage illustrations as "akin to strolling through an art gallery: wooden floor boards, burlap, buttons, pennies, seashells, tin, and basketball leather are among the ingredients assembled here."

Background

While focusing on the work of African American poets, *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall* is intended as a tribute to all fathers, no matter what their racial or cultural backgrounds. Publication of this book also marked the debut of Javaka Steptoe as a children's book illustrator. This was particularly significant for the artist because he is the son of the late children's book author, illustrator, and Caldecott Medalist, John Steptoe (1949-1989).

In 1998, Javaka Steptoe was won the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award for *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall*. The King Awards honor African American authors and artists of outstanding books for children and young adults that demonstrate sensitivity to the true worth and value of all people. In addition to this award, *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall* has received many other honors, including being chosen as an ALA (American Library Association) Notable Book for Children and winner of *Parenting* magazine's Reading Magic Award

"I've thought about illustrating children's books all my life," says Steptoe. "Being the son of John Steptoe, people always asked if I was planning to follow in my father's footsteps." At the time Steptoe was approached to work on this collection of poetry about fathers, he says, "I was thinking a lot about my relationship with my father and ideas of manhood. I thought this book would be perfect." The original illustrations range in size from very small to very large. The smallest piece, pictured on the dedication page, fits easily in the palm of an adult's hand. The largest piece, "My Father's Eyes," is 10 feet long and five feet high.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

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

1. What is special about a father? a grandfather?
2. What are some things fathers and grandfathers can teach children?
3. How could you honor or celebrate a parent or grandparent?
4. What kinds of poetry have you read? What is your favorite poem?

Teacher Tip

Although all children should be able to enjoy and appreciate the poems in this book, you will want to be sensitive to children who have lost their fathers or whose fathers do not live at home.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Display the front cover of the book and read aloud the title. Invite students to talk about what they think the title means. Why do you think the words "I AM TALL" are in capital letters?

Draw students' attention to the illustration and discuss the size of the father. Why do you think the artist made the father so large? Explain that this book is a collection of poetry about fathers and grandfathers. Ask students to speculate about what these poems might talk about.

Invite students to comment on the materials used to create the front/back cover illustration. If students are not familiar with the term "collage," explain that a collage is a picture made out of various objects and materials pasted onto a surface, often with a three-dimensional quality.

Call attention to the names on the back cover. Ask students why they think these names are listed there.

Vocabulary

Although students won't find too many unfamiliar words in the book, they may find familiar words used in unfamiliar or different ways. For example, point out the use of the word *thunders* in the first line of the poem "Lightning Jumpshot" by Michael Burgess. Explain that normally voices don't "thunder," but the poet used the word in a special way to create a particular mood. Ask students to share their ideas about what the poet means when he says "Daddy's voice thunders." Help students see that the poet used the metaphor of a storm to describe a father making a basketball shot. Ask students to find other words in the poem that support this metaphor (lightning, storm).

Work with students to find other examples of familiar words in the book, which the poets used in new or different ways. You might also discuss how poets use (or don't use) capitalization and punctuation to create certain effects or express feelings.

Teacher Tip

While discussing various examples of poetic license, you might also point out that sometimes poets write in a dialect to achieve a certain effect. Give as an example the poem "Tickle Tickle."

READING AND RESPONDING

Discussion Questions

After reading the book, you may wish to use some of these questions to generate discussion and expand students' understanding of the poems.

1. In the poem "in daddy's arms," who is speaking? How does the speaker feel about his father? What are some things the speaker can do in his father's arms? How does this make the speaker feel? Have you ever felt like this? Invite students to share their experiences.
2. In the poem "Her Daddy's Hands," why were his hands hard? When were his hands soft? Why do you think it happened then?
3. What is happening in the poem "Tickle Tickle?" Have you ever had an experience like this? How did it make you feel? Why?
4. What is the mood of the poem "The Things in Black Men's Closets?" Why was the father looking for his hat? How does the mood change from the beginning of the poem to the end?
5. The poem "Seeds" was written by the illustrator of this book. Based on what you know about Javaka Steptoe, to whom do you think he is speaking? What does he mean when he says "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree"?
6. In the poem "Artist to Artist," why does the poet say she writes books now because her father wanted to be an artist when he grew up? What did the father do that enabled the girl to be a writer? How does she feel about her father's actions?

Visual Literacy

Help students add to their understandings of the poems by exploring some of the illustrations in more detail.

1. In the illustration for the Ashanti proverb at the beginning of the book, where do you think the boy is? What is he walking on? What does the blue represent? Why are the footprints so big?
2. From what viewpoint do you see the boy and his father in "in daddy's arms?" Where is the reader?
3. In "The Farmer," what items are used to suggest the farm setting, farm tools, and the farmer, himself?
4. In the illustration for "Seeds," what is happening to the apple in the small pictures on the left-hand page? How do these images relate to the words of the poem?

Literature Circles*

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

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to those in the Discussion Question section above to help students explore their own reactions to the poems.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines or phrases that reveal specific feelings such as pride, joy, respect, or sadness.
- The **Illustrator** might draw pictures to illuminate things not specifically shown in the book illustration, such as the boy doing what his father told him not to do in "Promises."
- The **Connector** might find references to Africa in the book and talk about why these are meaningful.
- The **Summarizer** should provide a brief summary of the group's reading for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might find additional poems about fathers or grandfathers to share with the group.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. One such book you may wish to refer to is *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 1994).

Reader's Response

Help students personalize what they have read by encouraging them to respond to one or more of the following. Students might respond in sketchbooks, journals, or oral discussion.

1. Which poem(s) expressed your feelings about a parent best? Why?
2. Why is the art so important in this book? Which illustration appealed to you most? Why? How did it help you understand the poem?
3. How are some of the poems like little stories?

4. Pick one of the illustrations. Write five words that describe it. Choose the best words you know to express how you feel about the picture.
5. What did you learn from this book of poems?

Other Writing Activities

Ask students to respond to one or more of the following writing activities.

1. Reread the poem "Promises" with students, pointing out the letter format of the son writing to his father and the father writing back to his son. Have students use a similar format to write a poem to a parent, grandparent, or other special adult in their lives.
2. Encourage students to write a short prose description of a favorite time with a friend or family member.
3. Ask students to pretend they are the book critic for the school or public library. Have them write a review of *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall* for other students to consult before reading the book. Remind students that the book has won many awards, including the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award, the Reading Magic Award from *Parenting* magazine, and an ALA Notable Book citation.
4. List the following observances on the chalkboard or a chart: Martin Luther King Day (in January), Black History Month (February), National Poetry Month (April), and Father's Day (in June). Have students work in small groups to choose one of these observances and write an explanation of why this book would be a good choice to read in conjunction with their chosen observance.
5. Toward the end of the school year, students may wish to write their own father or grandfather poems to present to their fathers or grandfathers on Father's Day (the third Sunday in June).

ESL Teaching Strategies

The following activities may be used with students who speak English as a second language.

1. Have strong English speakers make tape recordings of the poems in the book. ESL students can follow along in the book as they listen to the tapes to become familiar with the spoken and written words.
2. Model how to use the illustrations to gain meaning from the text. Read aloud a poem and comment on how the illustrations help you understand it. Take advantage of the materials and objects Steptoe uses in his collages and identify both the materials and the things they depict.
3. Have volunteers act out some of the shorter poems or parts of the longer poems to help ESL students gain clearer understandings of the poems. For example, students might dramatize the actions in "Tickle Tickle" or "in daddy's arms."

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

To integrate students' reading experiences with other curriculum areas, you may wish to have them complete some of the following activities.

Art

Review with students that Javaka Steptoe's illustrations for the book were created as collages. They are made out of various objects and materials pasted onto different surfaces, often with a three-dimensional quality.

Read students the "About the Illustrations" note on the last page of the book. Then challenge students to experiment with their own form of collage illustration. They might try illustrating one of the poems in the book or a story or other poem of their own choosing.

Social Studies

1. Students might research and compare the roles of fathers in different cultures. Questions students might seek to answer could include:
 - What are the traditional roles of fathers and grandfathers in this culture? How do these roles compare to modern-day roles?
 - What are the father's and grandfather's roles in the family? in the community?
 - How do children view fathers and grandfathers in this culture?
2. Remind students that February is Black History Month. Have students plan to read aloud poems from *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall* as part of their celebration during this month. Also have them find poems or books of poetry by other African American writers, and encourage students to share those poems with the class.

Teacher Tip

Tie IN DADDY'S ARMS into your observance of Martin Luther King Day in January. Tell students that the book won the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award. Coretta Scott King is Martin Luther King's widow. The award honors African American authors and artists of outstanding books for children and young adults that demonstrate sensitivity to the true worth and value of all people.

Literature

1. Share with students that Javaka Steptoe's father was a well-known children's book author and illustrator named John Steptoe. Display some of John Steptoe's books such as *Stevie*, *The Story Of Jumping Mouse*, and *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale*. Have students plan to read aloud one of John Steptoe's books to a class of younger children. Students may also find it interesting to compare the illustration styles of Javaka Steptoe and his father.
2. List the poets represented in *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall* on the chalkboard. Ask students to find other poems by these people and share them with the class. Students may consult the short biographies on the last page of the book for some initial sources.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Javaka Steptoe is a graduate of Cooper Union in New York City. He works as an illustrator and a fine artist and also speaks frequently to teachers and children around the country. 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. He loves the traveling that has come with the awards *In Daddy's Arms* has won. "Every time I leave home I gain a greater understanding of the world I live in," he says. 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."

Javaka's latest book published by LEE & LOW BOOKS is *The Jones Family Express*, which represents his debut as an author/illustrator.

Awards & Reviews

Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award (1998)

"Libraries will want this title for Black History Month, National Poetry Month, Father's Day, or anytime a patron asks for a book about fathers. Teachers will find it inspiring in classroom units or poetry, or it can be used in conjunction with David Diaz's work to demonstrate collage techniques in an art class. Whatever its use, this lovely book deserves a place on library shelves."—*School Library Journal*

Please see our Web site, for an update-to-date listing of awards and reviews at:
<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/daddy.html>

Resources on the Web

Learn more about *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

Other books by Javaka Steptoe:

***The Jones Family Express*:**

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/72/hc/the_jones_family_express

Booktalk with Javaka Steptoe

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

Other **Active Reader Classroom Guides**:

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

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Order Information

On the Web:

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

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/66/hc/in_daddy_s_arms_i_am_tall_african_americans_celebrating_fathers (secure on-line ordering)

By Phone:

212-779-4400 ext. 25

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