



**Classroom Guide for**  
**RENT PARTY JAZZ**  
by **William Miller**  
Illustrated by **Charlotte Riley-Webb**

**Reading Level**

\*Reading Level: Grades 2-3  
Interest Level: Grades 1-4  
Guided Reading Level: N  
Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.3/.5

\*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

**Themes**

Music (Jazz), Friendship and Community, Helping Others, African American History

**Synopsis**

This story is set in New Orleans in the 1930s. Sonny and his mother are scraping by to pay their rent. Mama works in a fish canning factory, and Sonny works for the coal man before school each morning. When Mama loses her job, they no longer have enough money for the rent and fear that the landlord will turn them out. One day Sonny meets Smilin' Jack, a jazz musician who is playing his trumpet in Jackson Square. Smilin' Jack offers to play at a party at Sonny's house to help raise money for the rent. The neighbors all come to sing and dance and before they leave, drop some coins in a bucket. Sonny learns how people can help one another "if they put their minds and hearts to it."

**Background**

Rent parties were often held in the South during the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in African American neighborhoods. Begun as fund-raising events for church groups, the parties developed into a way to help people in financial distress. In New Orleans, rent parties became a way for young jazz musicians, such as Louis Armstrong, to develop their styles and hone their skills in front of audiences. In this way, the parties helped musicians prepare for the clubs in Chicago and New York in which they would someday appear. In later times, rent parties were held to raise bail for people unjustly jailed and for workers on strike. National events such as Farm Aid are more recent versions of these efforts. Another example would be the concerts to raise money after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

**Teaching Tip**

*Rent Party Jazz* is an excellent book to feature during 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 set the stage for reading with questions such as the following.

1. Why do you think people help one another? How do people in your neighborhood help one another?
2. Have you ever heard jazz? What is it? How does it make you feel?
3. Why are jobs important to people? Have you ever earned money? How?
4. Why is education important? What are some advantages it gives you?

**Exploring the Book**

Display the book and discuss the title with students. Ask them what they think the title means. What might the book be about?

Point to the author's name. Ask students if they have ever read any books by this author before. If so, what were they about?

Draw attention to the cover illustration. Ask students to tell what the people in the picture are doing. How does the picture make them feel? Why?

**Setting a Purpose for Reading**

Have students read to find out what a rent party is and how it helps people.

**VOCABULARY**

Draw a word web on the board and write the word **MUSIC** in the center bubble. Challenge students to find words in the book that are related to music and to write these on the web. Follow up by having students use each web word in a sentence.

Some possible words students might find are:

trumpet	horn	tune	musician	jazz
banjo	verses	chorus	blowing	pluck

**Teaching Tip**

Tell students that authors sometimes write in a dialect to achieve a certain effect such as authenticity. Point out the use of "mah" instead of "my" in the coal man's call and explain that when the coal man speaks, the word "my" sounds like "mah".

## AFTER READING

### Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation. Encourage students to refer back to the book to support their responses.

1. How can you tell this story takes place in the past?
2. Why does Sonny work before school?
3. What is a canning factory? Why is Mama let go from her job?
4. What problems do Sonny and his mother face?
5. How does Smilin' Jack feel when he plays the trumpet?
6. Why does Smilin' Jack understand Sonny's problem so well?
7. How does Smilin' Jack help Sonny?
8. Why is a bucket important at the party?
9. What can you tell about Smilin' Jack from his actions?
10. Why does everyone have such a good time at the rent party?
11. What does Sonny learn from meeting Smilin' Jack?
12. How might a young musician's career benefit from playing at a rent party?

### 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 book.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines that suggest the characters' feelings.
- The **Illustrator** might draw scenes not pictured in the book, such as Sonny at school or Smilin' Jack playing in a club up North.
- The **Connector** should provide a brief summary of each section that the group has completed.
- The **Summarizer** should provide a brief summary of each section that the group has completed.
- The **Investigator** might collect books about New Orleans and its jazz heritage.

\*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. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, oral discussion, or drawings.

1. Do you think Sonny ever sees Smilin' Jack again? What might they say to one another at a future meeting?
2. Do you think people might have a party like a rent party today? What would the party be like?
3. What are some things in the book that seem unfair to you? Why?
4. Why does Mama insist that Sonny stay in school? What advice would you give to Sonny about school?

**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. Imagine that you have attended a rent party where Smilin' Jack played his trumpet. Write a review of Smilin' Jack's performance.
2. Write a letter to a friend in which you describe a rent party. Include details about what people do, eat, hear, and see.
3. Design a leaflet or poster telling about an upcoming rent party. Include information about where, when, and why the party is being held.
4. Write a paragraph explaining an idea you have for a way that people in a community can help one another.

**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. Explain that some expressions in English have meanings other than their dictionary definitions. Give examples such as the following and have strong English speakers explain the meanings:  
    "You're looking mighty *down*."  
    ". . . the party *heated up* . . ."  
    ". . . he could blow a *mean* horn"
2. Make a tape recording of the story for students to listen to as they follow along in the book.
3. Break down large chunks of information into small chunks to foster comprehension.
4. Have ELLs dictate questions about the book. Set aside time to help students explore these queries.

## INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

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

### Social Studies

1. Locate a city map of New Orleans in an encyclopedia, from the Chamber of Commerce, or online. Have students find places mentioned in the story such as Jackson Square, the French Quarter, and the Mississippi River. They might also be interested in locating other places of interest such as the Superdome and Louis Armstrong Park.
2. Create a bulletin board of contemporary “rent party” stories from newspapers, magazines, and online articles in which students, neighbors, or community members work together to help one another. Challenge students to bring in as many articles as they can to share with the class.

### Science

Point out the unique location of New Orleans on land that is below sea level and that lies between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River. Have students use library resources and the internet to learn about the levees and drainage system on which the city relies. Then lead a discussion of what happened when Hurricane Katrina hit the city in August 2005.

### Music

1. Introduce students to New Orleans-style jazz by playing selections from an album of the Preservation Hall Jazz Band.
2. Interested students might find out more about Louis Armstrong and plan audio-visual reports for the class.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**William Miller** is the author of numerous award-winning books for young people published by LEE & LOW BOOKS. The include *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree*, *Frederick Douglass: The Last Days of Slavery*; *Richard Wright and the Library Card*; *The Bus Ride*, *Night Golf*; *The Piano*, and *Joe Louis, My Champion*. Complete listings of awards for these books can be found at [leeandlow.com](http://leeandlow.com).

Miller was raised in Anniston, Alabama, and received his doctorate in English and American literature from the State University of New York in Binghamton. He now lives in York, Pennsylvania, where he teaches creative writing and African American literature at York College. Miller 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

**Charlotte Riley-Webb** made her picture book debut with *Rent Party Jazz*. This was followed by illustrations for LEE & LOW's *Sweet Potato Pie*. Riley-Webb is a graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Art and works full-time as a fine artist. Her work has been exhibited in more than twenty-five major shows worldwide. Riley-Webb was born in Atlanta and now lives with her husband in Stockbridge, Georgia. She values her art as a

way to preserve and celebrate cultural traditions. "I think that it's imperative that we document our heritage," she says.

*Rent Party Jazz* has received several awards and honors. These include:

- Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People, National Council for the Social Studies and Children's Book Council (NCSS/CBC)
- "Choices," Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)
- Best Children's Books of the Year, Bank Street College
- Original Art Show, Society of Illustrators

### **Book Information**

\$7.95, PAPERBACK

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Reading Level: Grades 2-3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Interest Level: Grades 1-4

Guided Reading Level: N

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.3/0.5

Themes: Music (Jazz), Friendship and Community, Helping Others, African American History

### **RESOURCES ON THE WEB**

Learn more about *Rent Party Jazz* at

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/98/pb/rent\\_party\\_jazz](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/98/pb/rent_party_jazz)

### **Also by William Miller**

#### **The Bus Ride:**

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/27/hc/the\\_bus\\_ride](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/27/hc/the_bus_ride)

#### **Frederick Douglass: The Last Day of Slavery**

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/51/hc/frederick\\_douglass\\_the\\_last\\_day\\_of\\_slavery](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/51/hc/frederick_douglass_the_last_day_of_slavery)

#### **Joe Louis, My Champion**

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/70/hc/joe\\_louis\\_my\\_champion](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/70/hc/joe_louis_my_champion)

#### **Night Golf**

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/87/hc/night\\_golf](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/87/hc/night_golf)

#### **The Piano**

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/90/hc/the\\_piano](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/90/hc/the_piano)

#### **Richard Wright and the Library Card**

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/99/hc/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](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/158/hc/richard_wright_y_el_carne_de_biblioteca)

#### **Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree**

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/136/hc/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](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/163/hc/zora_hurston_y_el_arbol_sonador)

**Also illustrated by Charlotte Riley-Webb**

**Sweet Potato Pie**

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/117/hc/sweet\\_potato\\_pie](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/117/hc/sweet_potato_pie)

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

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

**Order Information**

**On the Web:**

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

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/98/pb/rent\\_party\\_jazz](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/98/pb/rent_party_jazz) (secure on-line ordering)

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