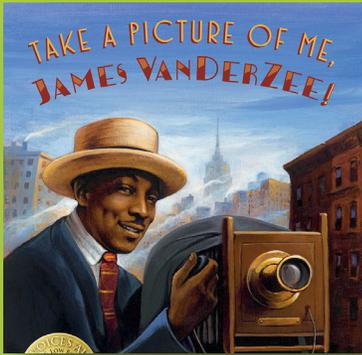


## TEACHER'S GUIDE



LEE & LOW BOOKS

# Take a picture of me, James VanDerZee

written by *Andrea J. Loney*

illustrated by *Keith Mallett*

## About the Book

**Genre:** Nonfiction/Biography

**\*Reading Level:** Grades 3-4

**Interest Level:** Grades 2-5

**Guided Reading Level:** S

**Accelerated Reader® Level/  
Points:** N/A

**Lexile™ Measure:** N/A

\*Reading level based on the Spache  
Readability Formula

**Themes:** Art/Photography, New  
York/Harlem Renaissance, Pride,  
Perseverance/Overcoming  
Obstacles, Pursuing a Dream,  
African American Interest

## SYNOPSIS

James VanDerZee was just a young boy when he saved enough money to buy his first camera. He took photos of his family, classmates, and anyone who would sit still for a portrait. By the fifth grade, James was the school photographer and unofficial town photographer.

Eventually he outgrew his small town and moved to the exciting, fast-paced world of New York City. After being told by his boss that no one would want his or her photo taken “by a black man,” James opened his own portrait studio in Harlem. There he perfected his craft and took photographs of legendary figures of the Harlem Renaissance—politicians such as Marcus Garvey, performers including Florence Mills, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, and Mamie Smith—and ordinary folks in the neighborhood too. Everyone wanted fancy portraits by James VanDerZee.

Winner of Lee & Low’s New Voices Award, *Take a Picture of Me, James VanDerZee!* tells the story of a groundbreaking artist who chronicled an important era in Harlem and showed the beauty and pride of its people.



## BACKGROUND

**James VanDerZee (Adapted from Afterword):** In 1884, John and Susan Elizabeth VanDerZee, the butler and maid for President Ulysses S. Grant, left their posts in his New York residence to start a family. They moved to Lenox, Massachusetts, a sleepy, multicultural town that became a vacation retreat for wealthy aristocrats in the summer. A year after their first child, Jennie, arrived, James Augustus Joseph VanDerZee was born on June 29, 1886. The next year, their son Walter was born, and three more children followed – Charles, Johnny (who died at age six, when James was 10), and Mary.

James’s first working camera was a four-by-five-inch box camera, operated on a stand. With supplies from the local drugstore, he developed his own pictures by following the directions that came with his first camera—the broken one. James was only a fifth grader when he became his school’s photographer. He was also the unofficial town photographer, and even took portraits of vacationing aristocrats.

Eventually, James outgrew life in his small town. In 1904, eighteen-year-old James and his brother Walter decided to join their father, who was working as a waiter at the Knickerbocker Trust in New York City. James took on many jobs. He played the violin and piano with the Fletcher Henderson and John Wanamaker Orchestras. In 1911, James got a job as an assistant photographer in a portrait studio in Newark, New Jersey. The next year, he joined his sister Jennie at the Toussaint Conservatory of Art and Music, where James photographed her young students. James honed his craft there until 1915, when he opened the Guarantee Photo Studio at 109 West 135th Street in Harlem with his new business partner, Gaynella Greenlee. Then James and Gaynella moved to a better location – the renamed G.G.G. Photo Studio at 272 Lenox Avenue. James and Gaynella were married for more than fifty years.

From 1915 through the 1980s, James took pictures of families, churches, businesses, soldiers, professional organizations, performers, athletes, religious leaders, and more. Marcus Garvey’s “Back to Africa” movement, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, hired James as the organization’s official photographer.

But as cameras became smaller, cheaper, and easier to use, James’s business declined. He went through hard times—losing his home, his wife Gaynella, and even

the rights to his own photographs. Then, in 1978, he married Donna Mussenden, and everything changed. With his new wife’s encouragement and support, James regained the rights to his work, returned to his career, and started taking pictures again. At ninety years old, James created portraits for many celebrities, including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Lou Rawls, and Muhammad Ali. He passed away in 1983 at the age of ninety-six.

James VanDerZee saw himself as an artist first, then a photographer. He was a master at transforming simple photographs into elaborate works of art. The camera was only one part of a complete set of tools he used to create portraits. First came the special lighting, clothing, backgrounds, and props. Second, James’s humor and warmth helped his customers relax for the camera. Finally, after the pictures were taken, James used a couple of techniques to perfect the portraits in the darkroom. He used an etching knife and a retouching pencil to erase parts of images, such as wrinkles, or draw in “corrections,” such as straight teeth.

During his lifetime, James VanDerZee created thousands of portraits, took more than 75,000 photographs, and created more than 125,000 plates, negatives, transparencies, and prints. Each image shared an extraordinary story about the people of Harlem, the quiet beauty of their everyday lives, the grandeur of their hopes and dreams, and, most of all, their inherent dignity and pride.



## 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

Lenox, Massachusetts, violin, piano, contraption, camera, photograph, sachets, darkroom, segregated, New York City, Harlem, pianist, elevator operator, assistant photographer, portraits, portrait studio, Harlem Renaissance, Marcus Garvey, Joe Louis, New York Black Yankees, Florence Mills, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Mamie Smith, city dwellers, props, street photography, passport photos, Metropolitan Museum of Art, exhibit, photomontage

### Academic

nestled, captured, develop, spinning, rushing, brightened, straightened, glamour, fancy, distinguished, grim, depictions, struggling, combined, elegant, pride, proudly, displayed, faraway, transforming

## BEFORE READING

### Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strands 4–5 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:

1. What hobbies or interests do you enjoy? Have you ever thought about pursuing them as a career?
2. What is photography? How is photography an art?
3. What do you know about photography or taking pictures? What do you use to take pictures? Have you ever used a film or digital camera? What do you enjoy taking pictures of? Are pictures important to you? Why or why not?
4. What do you know about biographies? What are the typical text features of biographies? What are some things that will not happen in biographies?
5. What was the Harlem Renaissance? What did it celebrate?
6. What does success and achievement mean to you? What are some examples?

### Exploring the Book

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

Read and talk about the title of the book. Ask students what they think the title *Take a Picture of Me, James VanDerZee!* means. Then ask them what and whom they think this book will most likely be about. What places or situations 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, inside front cover, title page, acknowledgements, dedications, illustrations, and afterword.

### Setting a Purpose for Reading

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

Have students read to find out about:

- James VanDerZee
- why James VanDerZee is an important figure in US art history



- how James chronicled an important era in Harlem
- how James overcame discrimination

Encourage students to consider why the author, Andrea J. Loney, would want to share this story with young people and adapt a Japanese crane story for today's readers.

## 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/or 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

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3 and Craft & Structure, Strand 4)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strand 4)

1. Where is James VanDerZee from?
2. What does James enjoy doing as a young child? How was drawing hard for him?
3. How does James react to the photographer's camera?
4. How does James earn a camera? How much was it?
5. What is a *darkroom*?
6. Why does James move to Harlem?
7. What type of job does James get?
8. Why does James's boss not allow him to take customers' portraits?
9. How does the way James take photographs differ from his boss? How does James make the photographs special?
10. Where does James open a photography studio?

11. Who does James photograph? What types of people?
12. How does taking photos of mostly middle-class black people distinguish James from other photographers?
13. What techniques and tools does James use to create "perfect portraits"?
14. Why does James' photography studio eventually decline in business?
15. Why are James' photographs shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art? What do they depict? How are they a part of history?

### Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3, Craft & Structure, Strands 4–6, and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strand 4)

1. Why were many black families moving from the South to the North? What was happening during this time period? Was the North free of racism and prejudice?
2. How do you think James felt being forced to go to the dark room by his boss?
3. How is James an artist first and a photographer second?
4. How does James use photography to tell or share a story?
5. What was the Harlem Renaissance? How were James VanDerZee and other artists an integral part of this cultural movement?
6. Why does Harlem become a social and cultural center for African Americans in the 1920s-1930s?
7. How do James's photographs capture the pride, beauty, and joy of Harlem?
8. How does James help bring the African American experience into the art world?
9. How is James a trailblazer in photography? What was innovative about his photographing style and technique?



★“**VERDICT:** Vivid visuals and comprehensive text combine for an excellent resource for biography collections.”

–*School Library Journal*

“The vibrant illustrations paired with the lively text make [this text] a picture book biography that truly shares the beauty VanDerZee saw in his heart.”

–*Shelf Awareness*

“Children will be drawn in by VanDerZee’s struggles, inspirations, and achievements as well as the idea that photographs can be both works of art and enduring historical records.”–*Kirkus Reviews*

10. How does the Harlem Renaissance affect or influence James’s career?
11. Why is it important that James took photographs of mostly the middle class and not just the very rich or poor?
12. How is James VanDerZee an important figure in chronicling African American history and culture?
13. How does technological innovation hurt James’s business?
14. How has photography evolved since the 1920s? How has the way people take pictures and the quality of cameras changed?
15. How do you think James VanDerZee felt seeing his photographs displayed in an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art?
16. What message does this story send about pursuing your dreams and aspirations?

### Reader’s Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1 and 2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)  
(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strand 1 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4 and 6)

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 want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. James VanDerZee pursued his dream of becoming a photographer. What are your dreams and aspirations? What do you hope to accomplish in the future? How do you hope or plan to do so?
2. What does the word *persistence* mean to you? Describe a time that you demonstrated persistence. How did you overcome any obstacles or challenges? What motivated or helped?
3. Personal cameras are more common and available than ever before. Why do you think people enjoy taking pictures? What do people hope to capture in photos? Why are photographs important or special to you or others you know? What makes them valuable?
4. James VanDerZee used techniques to edit peoples’ imperfections in photos—it can be considered an early form of modern-day Photoshop. Do you think it is right to use digital editing to retouch photographs? Why or why not? Do you or anyone you know use photo applications on their phone or computer to improve or edit pictures? If so, how and why are they used?
5. James VanDerZee’s legacy is celebrated and honored in museums and special exhibitions today. How do you hope to be remembered? What type of legacy do you hope to leave behind?



## ELL/ESL 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.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. 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 or learned about James VanDerZee.
5. The book 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: Students 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

### English Language Arts

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

1. Ask students to use the Bio Cube tool (<http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/games-tools/cube-a-30180.html>) and planning sheet from ReadWriteThink.org to write a biography based on *Take a Picture of Me, James VanDerZee!* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/take-a-picture-of-me-james-van-der-zee>) and additional resources.
2. Encourage students to write a diary entry from the perspective of James VanDerZee. Students should include multiple dates and passages both before and after James returns to the spotlight. How does James feel while pursuing his dream and about the various obstacles he faces? How does he persevere? What does he hope or wish for? How does James measure his success? How does James feel about the renewed attention his work receives? Does he feel any different? Why or why not?
3. Ask students to imagine they are going to interview the author and illustrator of *Take a Picture of Me, James VanDerZee!* Students should develop interview questions to ask the author and illustrator if they were on a talk show, news show, or radio show. What do students want to learn more about in terms of the writing process, the illustration process, inspiration or research for the story, James VanDerZee, photography careers, the Harlem Renaissance, discrimination, and so on?



4. Have students read additional books about pursuing your dreams and overcoming obstacles: *Little Melba and Her Big Trombone* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/little-melba-and-her-big-trombone>) and *Tiny Stitches: The Life of Medical Pioneer Vivien Thomas* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/tiny-stitches>). Ask students to compare and contrast each story to *Take a Picture of Me, James VanDerZee!* What is the central idea of each book? How are the books connected? What themes or ideas do they share?

### Social Studies/Geography

(Reading Standards, Craft and Structure, Strand 4, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)  
(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1 and 2, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9)  
(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

1. Encourage students to research the Harlem Renaissance (1920s-1930s) and its effect on African-American society and culture. What led to or influenced the Harlem Renaissance? What was the Great Migration and what part did it play in this movement? What factors influenced the Great Migration? What was the immediate and long-term impact of the Harlem Renaissance on African-American culture and American society? How did it affect art, music, and literature? Black pride and identity? What led to the end of the Harlem Renaissance?
2. Ask students to investigate other African American artists during the Harlem Renaissance and their portrayals of historic events, individuals, cultural perspectives, and the experiences and struggles of minorities through their artwork. How do their contributions influence or affect others today? What can we learn from their art? What themes or messages are still just as powerful or relevant today?
3. Explore The Harlem Renaissance Primary Sources (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/harlem-renaissance/>) and Teacher's Guide from the Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/>)

[primarysourcesets/harlem-renaissance/pdf/teacher\\_guide.pdf](http://www.leeandlow.com/primarysourcesets/harlem-renaissance/pdf/teacher_guide.pdf)) for further ideas and activities.

4. Have students learn more about African American life during the early 20th century. Make a chart with the following topics: Housing, School, Jobs, Segregation. Encourage students to explore “The Segregation Era (1900-1939)” from the Library of Congress for more information (<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/segregation-era.html>).

### Art/Media

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)  
(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

1. Provide students with images or digital access to view artwork/photographs from the Harlem Renaissance, such as James VanDerZee's. In a graphic organizer, have students identify their first impressions, the mood or feelings expressed in the artwork/photograph, historical details that reflect the time period, and finally how the mood and historical details relate to each other.
2. Ask students to compare and contrast James VanDerZee's photographs with other photographs of African Americans during the 1920s and 1930s. How are African Americans depicted in the photographs? What is different? How are African Americans viewed or treated based on your interpretation of the different photographs?
3. Why does art help individuals and groups express their history, frustrations, and their hopes for the future? Have students research and present contemporary examples of art that capture the hopes, dreams, fears, and anger of different groups of people today. What does the imagery, symbolism, colors, and words convey?
4. Provide each student with a different photograph depicting various people, things, interactions, and settings. Ask each student to infer and expand upon the information derived from the photograph. Who or what is this photograph of? What is happening before, during, and after the photograph? Where was the photograph taken? Who is the individual in the photograph? What is his or her story?



## Home-School Connection

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strand 4)  
(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–8)

1. If possible, have students visit or obtain digital access to a museum with a photography exhibit. Provide students with an analysis sheet to review and critically examine the photograph series. Who or what is the object of the photograph? How are lighting, perspective, size, and frame used to create different moods or effects? Where and when were these photographs taken? What evidence in or about the photograph indicates that? Are these photographs a form of art, history, or both? Why?
2. Encourage students to take photographs of their neighborhood/community that capture or express the essence and reality of where they live. Who is a part of your community? What is it known for? What do you want people to know about your neighborhood/community? Why is it unique, special, or meaningful to you? What is well known about your city/town? What is unknown? How are these pictures connected? How do they tell a story? Have students present their photography series in a digital slideshow presentation.
3. Ask students to create a photo story that chronicles their journey about who they are. Using photographs from birth to the present, have students assemble a physical or digital photo album. The photographs chosen should have significance to each student's personal life experiences. Students will then present and share their albums with the class, explaining how the photographs are connected and depict their individual narratives.
4. Have students ask their family members for copies or access to old photographs of their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and other relatives across the early to late 1900s or earlier. What can you determine about the individuals and the time period from the photographs? Where and what time period did they live? What do you think they were like? When and where do you think this photo was taken? What evidence in or about the photograph indicates the time period? Then have

students interview their family members about the individuals in these photographs and compare their results. How similar or dissimilar were your results? Why do you think this is?

5. Ask students to take pictures of members of their family that capture the personality of the individual, and depict them in a way that best expresses who they are. Encourage students to also take a self-portrait. Students should consider lighting, frame, size, viewpoint, perspective, and other effects for each photograph. Students will then display and discuss their photography series in a class exhibit.

### Additional titles to teach Biography:

***Tiny Stitches*** written by Gwendolyn Hudson

Hooks, illustrated by Colin Bootman

<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/tiny-stitches>

***How We Are Smart*** written by W. Nikola-Lisa,

illustrated by Sean Qualls

<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/how-we-are-smart>

***Ira's Shakespeare Dream*** written by Glenda

Armand, illustrated by Floyd Cooper

<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/ira-s-shakespeare-dream>

***Little Melba and her Big Trombone*** written by

Katheryn Russell-Brown, illustrated by Frank Morrison

<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/little-melba-and-her-big-trombone>



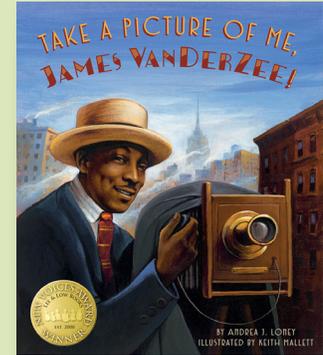
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Andrea J. Loney** is a screenwriter with an MFA in dramatic writing from New York University. She won the 2014 Lee & Low New Voices Award for *Take a Picture of Me, James Van Der Zee!*. Loney lives in California.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Keith Mallett** has been drawing and painting for as long as he can remember. As an artist and designer, he has created posters and fine art prints for more than thirty years. He had the pleasure of attending the original James VanDerZee exhibit, *Harlem on my Mind*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and was delighted to work on this biography. Mallett lives in San Diego, California, with his wife and their German Shepherd.

## Book Information for *Take a Picture of Me, James VanDerZee!*



\$18.95, HARDCOVER

978-1-62014-260-8

40 pages, 9 X 10-1/2

\*Reading Level: Grade 3-4

Interest Level: Grades 2-5

Guided Reading Level: S

Accelerated Reader® Level/  
Points: N/A

Lexile™ Measure: N/A

**THEMES:** Art/Photography,  
New York/Harlem Renaissance,  
Pride, Perseverance/Overcoming  
Obstacles, Pursuing a Dream,  
African American Interest

### RESOURCES ON THE WEB:

[https://www.leeandlow.com/  
books/take-a-picture-of-me-  
james-van-der-zee](https://www.leeandlow.com/books/take-a-picture-of-me-james-van-der-zee)

*All guided reading level placements  
may vary and are subject to revision.  
Teachers may adjust the assigned  
levels in accordance with their own  
evaluations.*

## ABOUT LEE & LOW BOOKS

**LEE & LOW BOOKS** is the largest children's book publisher specializing in diversity and multiculturalism. Our motto, "about everyone, for everyone," is as urgent today as it was when we started in 1991. It is the company's goal to meet the need for stories that children of color can identify with and that all children can enjoy. The right book can foster empathy, dispel stereotypes, prompt discussion about race and ethnicity, and inspire children to imagine not only a world that includes them, but also a world where they are the heroes of their own stories. Discover more at [leeandlow.com](http://leeandlow.com).

## ORDERING INFORMATION

### On the Web:

[www.leeandlow.com/contact/ordering](http://www.leeandlow.com/contact/ordering) (general order information)

<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/take-a-picture-of-me-james-van-der-zee> (secure online ordering)

**By Phone:** 212-779-4400

**By Fax:** 212-683-1894

**By Mail:** Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016