

Start With Rhythm

A New Book Invites Children to Explore the World of Jazz through Poetry and Images

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“**S**TART with rhythm/Start with the heart/Drumming in tongues...” begins the title poem, “Jazz,” in Walter Dean Myers’ latest children’s book. Myers states he is “very much in love with jazz as an art form.” But love, like most things in life, can be difficult, and in his latest project Myers embraces the complex nature of his subject. Myers is working with and against preconceived notions of what jazz poetry is and where the art form is going, while at the same time writing a paean to the history of New Orleans and a prayer for its future. Hurricane Katrina was a tragedy that left behind the devastation of a city that occupies a fabled place in the myth and history of America. It is a city that is loved or loathed—often both simultaneously. It is a city bursting with cultural diversity, with artists, musicians, and writers, and it is a city that is mired in drugs, violence, and poverty. How do we enter this place, post-Katrina, and preserve the beauty that was lost? How do we feel and express the unique vitality that was and remains New Orleans for our children and ourselves?

Myers understands and loves the contradictions of New Orleans and *Jazz* is his attempt to express this complexity in the language of poetry. There is an astonishing amount of jazz poetry already available, some of it breathtaking and some of it banal at best. I asked the author if he was conscious of this when he began the book and he responded that his “first try at the book didn’t work. It was too self-conscious, too much trying to be jazzy.” So back to the drawing board he went. “Jazz is a process, which I feel the artist loves more than the product,” says Myers. “It’s the act of creating . . . the ideas working the landscape of the poem.” The poems in this collection don’t just posture as jazz, but act as its embodiment. By carefully attuning himself to both the landscape and soundscape of words, Myers has created poems that don’t bother putting on airs of artifice, and this is, perhaps, what children—and the adults who share it with them—will love best about his book.

In his poem, “Louie, Louie, How You Play So Sweet?” the poem begins with the title that serves as a refrain,


Louie, Louie, how you play so sweet?
 What have you heard, down on Bourbon Street?
 I heard London
 Turned it black and blue
 Heard Copenhagen
 Played it my way, too
 Heard a sad song
 Swung it into joy. . . .

The poem is seemingly simple but its short lines are action-packed, and the assertive, sure rhythm and tight beat make it immediate, alive, and most of all accessible to children. Young readers (or listeners) will quickly be drawn into the fun—how it feels to have these words roll off the tongue with their musicality and swagger, the words buzzing the lips, giving them a taste of the energy of jazz and New Orleans.

Each poem in *Jazz* is paired with an illustration by Myers' son, Christopher Myers. This collaboration works because the father and son challenge each other's creativity and artistic sensibility. Christopher Myers is an accomplished artist in his own right and he brings that authority to his illustrations. The colors are as vivid as John Coltrane trading solos with Miles Davis; they have a brilliant pop akin to Max Roach's inventive drumming, and provide color and texture that capture the eye and surround the silences between the poems. *Jazz* does not overly glorify the music or the city of New Orleans, and the illustrations, slightly tinged with pain and suffering, embrace this clear-eyed view as well.

The senior Myers remembers reading Jean Toomer's book, *Cane*, "and being very impressed by it as a fifteen-year-old," but when he went to Louisiana and actually saw the cane fields and people who worked them he realized that Toomer, much as Hemingway in Spain, had romanticized the people. Children are astute in spotting inauthenticity, and Myers doesn't make the mistake of condescending to them. His book is steeped in his experiences "in juke joints and dives." He played basketball throughout Louisiana and served as a soldier there in the era of segregation. "The misery, and beauty, was always in your face if you cared to see it," he says. "I was very upset with things I saw in and around New Orleans prior to Katrina. I had also been in touch with *Angolite*, the Angola Prison magazine for a number of years . . . and what I wanted to do was present jazz from the point of view of low 'Nawlins,' as well as Preservation Hall and the concert stage. Katrina was predictable. The poor will always suffer—but the beauty created within poverty can't be ignored."

This book is ideal for the classroom because Myers, a Teachers & Writers Board member, and his son offer an intimate understanding of how art functions and what art can articulate and achieve. A year after the images of Katrina's devastation, the poems and illustrations let children see the city through a new perspective, one that acknowledges the past while offering hope for the future. They also offer a lesson on the porous boundaries between such categories as music, art, and poetry, and would serve as a fine introduction on how to combine these forms. The last poem in the book is called "It's Jazz" and is accompanied by a picture of a couple dancing against an explosion of

vibrant, brush-stroked yellows and oranges. The poem moves from old New Orleans to present-day New Orleans and ends with the lines, “It’s Jazz/In the HEAT of New Orleans,” an image of the city again in the act of creating music, life, and enough beauty to transcend the pain. 

Jazz, written by Walter Dean Myers. Illustrated by Christopher Myers, Holiday House Books, 2006.

It’s Jazz

I hear the call of the cornet

I hear a swinging clarinet

They’re playing HOT jazz in the heat

Of old New Orleans

The rattling banjo pays its dues

to the Preservation blues

They’re playing HOT jazz in the heat

of old New Orleans

There’s a *crazy* syncopation

And it’s tearing through the nation

And it’s bringing *sweet* elation

To every single tune

It’s jazz

There’s a drummer *rat-a-tatting*

there’s a patent shoe that’s *patting*

While a laid-back cat is *scatting*

About flying to the moon

It’s jazz

In the HEAT of New Orleans

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