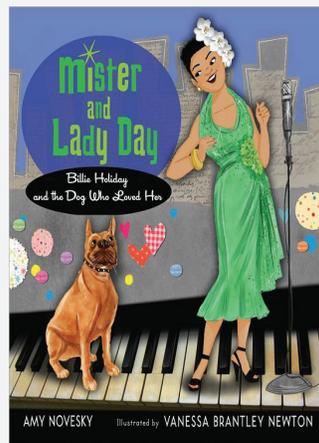


Second Reaction: Discussion Ideas for *Mister and Lady Day: Billie Holiday and the Dog Who Loved Her*

Novesky, Amy. *Mister and Lady Day: Billie Holiday and the Dog Who Loved Her*.
Illus. Vanessa Brantley Newton. New York: Harcourt Children's Books, 2013.

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Mister and Lady Day: Billie Holiday and the Dog Who Loved Her, written by Amy Novesky and illustrated by Vanessa Brantley Newton, is a beautiful picture book relating the special relationship the famous singer had with her dogs. The incredible illustrations are filled with bright colors, rich textures, and creative incorporation of mixed media. *Mister and Lady Day* lends itself to sharing with young readers through the unique way it tells the story of a star who had a troubled life. The author hints at the difficult times Billie had, but by focusing on her dogs, the story emphasizes what made her happy.

With younger readers, this book could guide discussion of feelings and what it means to be sad sometimes. The story acknowledges the darkness Lady Day felt in language children can understand. It does not avoid the negative aspects of her life, but also keeps discussion age appropriate. For example, the narrator says, "sometimes stars don't feel like shining. They need someone to listen. That's what friends are for" (unpaged). By demonstrating that her dogs were friends who made her happy, the author shows that everyone has sad times, but friends can be there for support. When Billie has to "leave home for a year and a day," where she went or why she had to go are not included. Instead, the author has chosen to place a short biography in the back of the book. In a straightforward, no frills way, this commentary plainly tells how Billie's sadness derived from being abandoned by her father as a child and

being away from her mother who left to work somewhere else. Author Novesky explains that Lady Day “suffered from a drug addiction and, at the peak of her career, was sentenced to one year in prison for drug possession” (unpaged). With younger children, teachers and parents may choose to omit reading that section of the biography if they are not comfortable discussing such topics. However, the author has given details that can be used if an adult wishes to discuss with children how families in the past—and currently—have had to deal with racism, depression, addiction, and incarceration.

In a language arts classroom, *Mister and Lady Day* can add much to any discussion of the Harlem Renaissance and its legacy for later American jazz greats. The teacher could then share Billie Holiday recordings to let the students become acquainted with jazz as a musical form. In addition, since Brantley Newton’s illustrations emphasize Lady Day’s glamorous clothes and famous fashion sense, the teacher could discuss the use of mixed media that includes photographs of objects from the time period, such as the table lamp and perfume bottles in Billie’s dressing room, her luggage, handbag, the hatbox she holds as she stands on a train platform, and the microphone she sings into on stage. The use of photographs highlights objects that we still use today, but are designed in different shapes and materials.

In addition to showing readers a view into life during the Harlem Renaissance, the illustrations also provide young readers the opportunity for developing visual literacy, the skills used to “read” images in order to make meaning and understand how meaning is represented through pictorial signs (Rhodes and Robnolt, 157). Newton’s illustrations are colorful, and the multiple textures and media make them interesting to explore. Almost every page was created with a variety of techniques and materials, and observing how they were created and inferring what they mean will deepen the children’s understanding of the story.

For example, the illustration depicting Billie saying goodbye to Mister before her trip shows Billie’s face in profile on one side and Mister’s face in profile on the opposite side. Billie has his face cupped in her hands and they are looking into one another’s eyes. Billie and Mister are rendered through drawings with charcoal pastels and watercolor paints. In the background is a collage of papers and photographs related to travel, such as a train, a train schedule, a train ticket from Los Angeles to Chicago, and a handwritten letter. Readers may consider how the travel artifacts in the background connect to the drawings of Billie and Mister looking into each other’s eyes, and how the drawing represents the written text discussing Billie’s sadness over having to leave Mister at home. Martens and colleagues assert that when readers learn to analyze and make meaning from both written and pictorial texts, their comprehension improves (206). *Mister and Lady Day: Billie Holiday and the Dog Who Loved Her* has wonderful potential for discussions with young readers.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Alisha M. White is an assistant professor at Western Illinois University. She is interested in research about how teachers integrate visual arts in English language arts curriculum and classrooms to differentiate instruction for multiple learners and create environments where images and image-making activities are valued as important means for thinking and communicating ideas.