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Activity Guide

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The Blues of Flats Brown

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ABOUT THE STORY

Flats Brown is a dog who lives in a junkyard. His owner, the mean and nasty A.J. Grubbs, makes Flats and his friend Caleb fight other dogs, while all Flats wants to do is play the blues on his guitar. One day, Flats and Caleb run away from A.J. Grubbs and begin to make their living playing the blues on the street and in clubs. But A.J. Grubbs follows them and finds them. How can Flats make A.J. Grubbs leave him to the music he loves?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Walter Dean Myers grew up in New York City. As a child, he loved to read, and he began writing for magazines and advertisers when he left the army. His first book, *Where Does the Day Go?*, won a contest for writers sponsored by the Council on Interracial Books for Children. Since then, he has written many acclaimed books for children and young adults.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Nina Laden grew up in the New York City area and now lives in a farmhouse in Seattle with her husband and three stepsons. She began drawing as a child, and after receiving a degree in fine arts from Syracuse University, she worked as a freelance illustrator. She has illustrated several other picture books.

INTRODUCING THE STORY

Ask children if they have ever listened to the blues. Explain that the blues is music, often with a sad theme, that comes from the American South. Tell the class that they will read a story about a dog who only wants to play the blues.

READING ACTIVITIES

Comprehension/Thinking Skills

- “What kind of person is A.J. Grubbs?”
- “Why do Flats and Caleb run away?”
- “What happens when A.J. Grubbs first finds Flats and Caleb?”
- “Where does Flats go after he leaves Caleb?”
- “What does Flats do when A.J. Grubbs finally finds him again?”
- “Why do you think A.J. Grubbs finally decides to leave Flats alone?” (Draw conclusions)
- “Why do you think Flats doesn’t stay in New York City?” (Draw conclusions)

Vocabulary

arthritis studio dedicated hoedown wandered freight

Write these words and sentences on the chalkboard. Have the children choose the correct word to complete each sentence below.

- The lost children _____ all over the town.
- Everyone danced and sang at the country _____.
- The band recorded their song at the _____.
- The writer _____ his new book to his family.
- Mrs. Burningham had trouble climbing stairs because of the _____ in her knees.
- The train was carrying _____ from the West Coast.

CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Music: Playing the Blues

Play a recording of blues music for the class. Artists to listen to include B.B. King, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and Buddy Guy. Have children listen carefully and write down descriptions of any images the music forms in their minds. Children can discuss and compare their reactions to the music.

Language Arts: Unusual Metaphors

The author uses many unusual metaphors in the story. Write these on the chalkboard: “as out of place as a three-legged skunk”; “skinny as a rail”; “lower than a bowlegged worm.” Have children volunteer definitions for these phrases. Then ask them to make up their own metaphors to describe these feelings: angry, sad, fearful.

Social Studies: Land of the Blues

Explain to the class that the blues is a musical form that has its roots in the bayou culture of the deep South. Ask them to work in groups to prepare reports on the bayou, and have them answer these questions in their reports:

- Where are bayous found?
- What kinds of plant and animal life are found in bayous?
- How do people live in bayou areas?

Children can share the information they find with the rest of the class.

Music: Singing “The New York City Blues”

If any children can read music and play an instrument or sing, have them perform “The New York City Blues” for the class. You may also wish to have a school music teacher perform the song. Children can work together to learn the song and can sing it for another class or for an assembly

INTERNET ACTIVITY

Before you send children to do research using any of the keywords listed below, you may wish to try them yourself to be sure the sites are suitable.

Learning About the Blues

Have children use the keywords music AND the blues to find information on the Internet about the history of the blues. Encourage them to work in pairs to find out about a famous blues performer or a famous place where the blues were performed. Children can report on what they learn to the class.