Jazz (Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Books)

Lovely & Lively--A Great Teaching Tool

From bebop to New Orleans, from ragtime to boogie, and every style in between, this collection of Walter Dean Myers's energetic and engaging poems, accompanied by Christopher Myers's bright and exhilarating paintings, celebrates different styles of the American art form, jazz. Jazz takes readers on a musical journey from jazz's beginnings to the present day. Includes timeline and jazz glossary.

My Personal Review:
Okay. A bit of a confession here. Back in 2003 I wrote a review of Blues Journey in which I said many nice things including, This is the book that took my breath away, which is fairly expansive even for me. Three years have now passed, and what father/son team Walter and Christopher Myers did for the blues they are doing now for jazz. Looking back on Blues Journey, I realize that at the time this was not a book I was particularly good at understanding. I had the wherewithal to know that it was beautiful, but if you asked me the number of times I've thought about Blues Journey in this three year interim, the answer would be hardly at all. Jazz is different. I know it sounds unlikely, but I think this book has something its predecessor lacked. Jazz has a purpose, defined by its dedication (To the children of New Orleans) and brought to searing sizzling life by both its author and its artist. No one can tell you after perusing this book that Jazz isn't hot as all get out.

An introduction. For two green pages we are given some facts before the fancy. What is jazz? Where are its roots? How did it grow, prosper, and come to flourish? Where is it today? That's a lot to slip into two little pages, but before you know it you've learned a fact or two and on you go to the poems. They echo what we've just discovered about the music itself. You're looking at a man, bare to the waist, beating out a rhythm on the drum just in front of him. Now it's a black silhouette of a piano player poised against a shifting deepening red background, lit from below. Were in New Orleans following a jazz funeral, then looking down on a
charismatic keyboardist with a zoot suit of fine scarlet lines. Beautiful women croon to men curved over, above, and around their instruments. Its jazz, baby. With a glossary in the back and a timeline for kicks.

Right off the bat Id like to thank Mr. Myers senior for explaining something to me in his lengthy two-page Introduction that I didnt even know I didnt know. The birth of jazz: how did it happen? The answer can be found in a small selection at the bottom of the first page. Since so many black musicians were still not formally trained in reading musical notation, there had to be some way of knowing what the other players were going to do so that they could perform together. So they used common chord structures that would allow them to stray from the melody and come back to it howsoever they were inclined. You would think that your average twenty-eight-year-old American would have picked up this kind of information somewhere amongst their various meanderings. Not so much. To Mr. Walter then, a debt of gratitude.

Music related books for youth, be they picture books, novels, or comic books, have the awesomely difficult task of conveying an absent sense through words alone. Sometimes a picture might help, but it is the rhythm of the words that keep the toes tapping and throat humming. When this book began I wasnt quite in the right mind set. I read the poems the same way you might read something by Robert Frost or Emily Dickinson. But even my Neanderthal brain began to get into the swing of things when I encountered the poem, Oh, Miss Kitty. It starts with a kind of blues refrain about the sweet Miss Kitty whos anything but small. Then the poem starts to get going. Without realizing it, your brain has suddenly started to add additional voices aside from the person singing the song. You read, shes in love with the piano man when suddenly words of a different color and font jump out of nowhere to say, tickle them ivories, boy!. Who said that? To my mind, its the jazz orchestra itself. And without even realizing it Im hearing different voices, tones, rhythms, beats, and all with just the gentle prodding of Walters words and some creative font use. Combine that with, what Joann Sfar in Klezmer called the, silent melody of drawing, and youre as close as youll ever get to fooling your ears through your eyes.

I also happen to think that Christopher Myers is getting better and better as the years go by. A quick glance at the publication page and we see that the illustrations were done, by painting black ink on acetate and placing it over acrylic. I have no idea what that means. Fortunately, I dont need to. Christopher is pushing himself here, bringing to mind scenes of remarkable beauty. A bassist stands in the harsh white light, all white features against black shadows. I like Myers better when he presents his musicians rather than his dancers. For some reason, the swing dancers in Jazz seem to have less verve and pep than even the most soulful of saxophonists. Sometimes Christopher messes with you too. The poem Session II about a slide trombone is coupled against the image of a man playing the drums. Session I, begins with, Bass thumping like death gone happy, but instead theres a horn player standing front and center. Still, jazz is an ensemble
creation. You don't blame an instrument if it appears where you thought another might crop up. Some leniency is required.

Not too long ago I was with a group of librarians discussing Jazz at their leisure. It was the opinion of some that in spite of its picture book packaging, this is a teen book at its core. No violence or sexual references inspired such an assumption. Its just that Jazz has a kind of sophistication to it that children may not be accustomed to. I hear now the mighty roar of the masses saying something to the equivalent of, Well GET them accustomed to it! Why place this book in an area where teens will pooh-pooh it for its young packaging while the audience that might get something out of it finds it out of reach and inaccessible? And I agree with you there. Still, I would suggest that for those libraries savvy enough (savvy may equal rich in this case) to risk it, try putting Jazz in both areas. It won't speak to all the kids or all the teens, but sometimes some is just enough.

We all have our favorite jazz related picture books. Most were created by Chris Raschka (Charlie Parker Played Be Bop, Mysterious Thelonious, John Coltranes Giant Steps, amongst others) with others filtering in here and there. My favorite is Jazz. No childrens book, to my mind, has acknowledged the New Orleans hurricane tragedy yet. No childrens book has had the chance. And while I am certain that Jazz was in production before the hurricane ever hit, Myers and son have tipped their hat to the city's brilliant musical past with just the right book. You'd be a fool to let yourself pass this one up.

For More 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price:
Jazz (Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Books) - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!