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# My Hands Sing The Blues: Romare Bearden's Childhood Journey




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## Synopsis

As a young boy growing up in North Carolina, Romare Bearden listened to his great-grandmotherÃ¢â ¬â„¢s Cherokee stories and heard the whistle of the train that took his people to the NorthÃ¢â ¬â •people who wanted to be free. When Romare boarded that same train, he watched out the window as the world whizzed by. Later he captured those scenes in a famous painting, Watching the Good Trains Go By. Using that painting as inspiration and creating a text influenced by the jazz that Bearden loved, Jeanne Walker Harvey describes the patchwork of daily southern life that Romare saw out the trainÃ¢â ¬â„¢s window and the story of his arrival in shimmering New York City. Artists and critics today praise BeardenÃ¢â ¬â„¢s collages for their visual metaphors honoring his past, African American culture, and the human experience. Elizabeth ZunonÃ¢â ¬â„¢s illustrations of painted scenes blended with collage are a stirring tribute to a remarkable artist.My Hands Sing the Blues is the recipient of the 2012 IRA Childrens and Young Adults Book Award-Primary Non-Fiction, as well as the gold winner of a Moonbeam Children's Book Award in the category of Picture Book-All Ages.

## Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 37 customer reviews

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Age Range: 6 - 8 years

Grade Level: 1st - 3rd

## Customer Reviews

K-Gr 3-In a first-person narrative that incorporates some of artist Romare Bearden's phrases and

ideas, and using his famous painting "Watching the Good Trains Go By" as her inspiration, Jeanne Walker Harvey gives voice to the history and experiences that inspired his famous collages. Born in North Carolina, Bearden and his family moved to Harlem in 1914 to escape discriminatory Jim Crow Laws and attitudes. In his collages, which he called paintings and "visual jazz," he analyzed the social and political issues of his time and also related his personal story as well as the daily life of African Americans in both the North and South. Kevin R. Free reads Harvey's fictionalized account (Marshall Cavendish, 2011) of the artist's life with a cadence that turns the rhyming lines into a blues song, its rhythm rising and falling and bouncing along, sometimes singing the train whistles and engines like a jazz tune. The audio version perfectly accompanies Elizabeth Zunon's Bearden-like collage illustrations and text that changes size and color for emphasis. The author's note, which details the life and describes the work of Bearden, is included, but source notes from the book are not. While this fictionalized biography provides an excellent introduction to the Great Migration North and the Harlem Renaissance, it is also a work of art in words and pictures.-MaryAnn Karre, Horace Mann and Thomas Jefferson Elementary Schools, Binghamton, NYÃ Â (c) Copyright 2011. Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc. No redistribution permitted.

Ages 5-8 Hands aren t known to sing, but in this picture book about the childhood of Romare Bearden, hands take on a new attribute. From snipping, to patching, to painting and pasting, this young Carolina boy finds his gift of visual creativity by using his hands to sing the blues. With a Great-grandma sharing the history of the land of the Cherokees to blues and jazz music, Bearden integrates a little of what he has experienced in his famous artwork. This book gives teachers and librarians an excellent source of the Great Migration North, life in the north and south, and how children can be inspired by it all. Illustrations incorporate collages and watercolor paintings in this biography. Children will stay attentive to the innovatively written text and colorful illustrations. Shiela Martina Keaise, Children s Librarian, Colleton County Memorial Library, Walterboro, South Carolina. Recommended. --Library Media Connection, January/February Advanced ReviewsAges 5-8 Bearden called his art visual jazz, and this handsome, fictionalized picture-book biography stays true to his rich connections to blues rhythms. With well-chosen quotes (all documented in appended notes), the rhyming first-person narrative in Bearden s voice remembers the people and places of his childhood roots, and his memory whirls back to his growing up in the rural South and then his train journey north to Harlem. Echoing Bearden s distinctive style, the richly textured collage art combines original paintings with paper, fabrics, and photos to show Bearden as a small boy

watching trains pass until he and his parents get on a train themselves, and he sees the world whizzing past: A patchwork quilt of greens and gold. The moving climax shows and tells Bearden s approach to work, blending his roots with improvisation: When I put a beat of color on an empty canvas, / I never know what s coming down the track. A lively introduction to the artist for young children and for older readers, too. --Hazel Rochman, Booklist, November 1st Issue

Shows lack of research and very wordy

Beautiful and artful illustrated book as presented to my student. Book arrived with sliced cover, too late to return for new cover.

My kindergarten students and I loved this story! We used the book to do a train related art response.

The book is great as a teaching tool for elementary art classes. My students remember Romare afterreading this book. We studied him for a month and this book really complimented all our lessons. The artworkis fantastic! The kids especially loved to hear their teacher read the train noises, they all giggled and wanted tohear it again:)

It’s a beautiful story of a wonderful artist.

:)

Children and Art should make for an easy and immediate connection and one might think that writing about an artist for children is a piece of cake. Not quite. And, an illustrated book on an artist for children is even more complicated - while any book on an artist like Bearden is not for the fainthearted!There are other books for children on Bearden (see Hartfield/ Lagarrigue for a very different treatment in narrative and visual interpretation) this new effort by Harvey and Zunon is ideally meant for much younger children than the publishersÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ stated or recommended 6-8 years old.The story itself is quite narrow, avoids anything harsh or political, (presumably as it was beyond what Bearden would have understood at the time of his moving North?) and has large format double page spreads done in a disjointed mix of photograph and tempera (?) which conflate both Bearden the mature artist’s technique and Bearden as a young boy in memory within these scenes. A young child would have no problem connecting a few words here

or there with the pagesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ imagery. Older children would and should expect more meat to this story ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ essentially this one could have been done in 3 or 4 spreads at most without losing any of its appeal.Part of the issue with any artist is do the authors USE the artistsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ own works to illustrate, hopefully, their own words? And, if NOT, then why not? Is the artist too cerebral, too inaccessible, too contradictory or simply mute on much of their work? But Bearden was none of those things, in fact the absolute BEST line in the whole book is found in the dedication, and it is from Bearden (of course!): ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â| you put down one color, and it calls for an answer. You have to look at it like a melody.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•Anyone who is familiar with making art or following as articulate an artist as Bearden would pounce and say, ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“make THIS your story!ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• Ie. How does someone like a collage artist make their imagery? This quote is followed by the single best double page spread on the very next page, where we see a young BeardenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s hands cutting out ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“snipsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• for a full size example of a collage - with the familiar disjointed yet comforting (to me anyway) pieces all jumbled and yet as carefully placed as any acrobat walking across a high wire.I wish the author has simply used BeardenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s own words (see the back pages on Source Notes) which are just crushingly perfect, ie. ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“I donÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã ËœdoÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ a collage. I just allow some of the people I know to come into the roomÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ or, better yet, ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“the artist has be to be something like a whale, swimming with his mouth wide open, absorbing everything, until he has what he really needs. When he finds that, he can start to make limitations. AND THEN HE REALLY BEGINS TO GROW.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• These are certainly words and images even young children would grasp with an intimacy close to making the art itself.And similarly I wish the illustrator had used BeardenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s works framed within her own larger format as if we see the child creating these images. Many of the double page spreads simply overwhelm the simple (not simplistic) moment of the story being told on those pages.Again, for young readers (as in 3-5, who arenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t actually reading) this works, especially if the adult is reading to them in the sing-song rhyming fashion that it is written, and they are entranced by the large faces, bold colors, nicely placed type within the imagery itself. The one spread that fell a little flat should have been the most visually intriguing - where young Bearden is walking with his Great-grandma ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“down the old dirt road to the land of the Cherokees from where her stories flowed.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• The imagery gives nothing to the words, nothing of ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“CherokeesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• nor even a compelling view of this countryside much

less the beckoning road. We need here an authentic taste of what real North Carolina trees, birds, flowers and landscape look like, especially as it was so palpable to Bearden his whole life.But that is a quibble, for young children it is just a missed opportunity to connect them to the physical place that was Carolina in his heart and mind, and the Carolinas do NOT look like New York or Michigan or Iowa or anywhere else. Bearden always had the delightful ability to make the Viewer feel the place he was constructing, be it a field or a street.And this is testament to why is has achieved (finally) real respect - his painting (collage) technique was by its very nature visually disjointed, and just like that high wire acrobat he knew just where to step, keeping Viewers intrigued and curious along with intimately drawn into his ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“storyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (which often werenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t stories at all, but fleeting memories tucked into a structure we might call a ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“streetÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• or a ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“face.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•

This book was sent to me by  as part of their ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Vine ReviewerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• program in which they send items to a selected group of reviewers.I was surprised to see it on the list of review items since the book was published in 2011 but ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ as a music journalist - the subject of ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Jazz/BluesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• interested me and I was familiar with BeardenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s work.This slim (40-page) hard bound book is approximately the size of a 10-inch 78rpm record sleeve. The ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“BluesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• in the bookÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s title actually refers to the style of prose that author Jeanne Walker Harvey uses to tell the story. Each page contains three lines of text: two nearly identical lines and then a third, all with the end-word rhyming. This is the standard AAB structure of a 12-bar blues song.Bearden is shown as a 2-year old boy growing up in Charlotte, North Carolina and spending time with his Great-grandparents. He then moves with his parents to Harlem in 1914 to escape the Jim Crow laws. (His grandparents are never mentioned.) The author spends a page showing the color-restricted rest rooms on the way. Once in NY and an adult, Bearden creates his collages. What the book never discusses is BeardenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s education and how he became an artist.Before reading the rest of the book, IÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢d suggest that a parent turn to the back where there is a one page biography of Bearden. This is not something you would read to your children, since itÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s written for an adult. With that info, the parent can expand on the words and illustrations in the basic text. Interestingly, this bio refers to one of BeardenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s most famous works ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“ Watching The Good Trains Go ByÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• and says it is on ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Page 5ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•. However, the pages are not numbered! There are aloso two pages of ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Source NotesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•

and a list of Books, Internet sites and a DVD about Bearden, but these are more for adults than children.The book is well illustrated and I liked the few recreations of the collages.
IÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢m not sure that the book will introduce children to blues music but the illustrations may further their interest in BeardenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s work and the discussion of conditions in the south in the early-to-mid- 20th century, and the black migration north will certainly give the parent an inroad for discussion with their child.I hope you found this review both informative and helpful.Steve RammÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Anything PhonographicÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•

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