

A publication for readers personally and professionally involved in children's literature

Books to Make Children's Eyes Dance Across the Pages: Music and Children's Literature

by Megan Lambert

During an April 2004 presentation at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, MA, illustrator Brian Selznick related his work as a visual artist of worded texts to the work of choreographers. He said that great choreography allows him to access music at a different level, "I'm a visual person," he said, "so seeing a visual interpretation of sound allows me to more deeply feel, understand and connect to music." It follows that great illustration of a text can allow for a deeper book experience as the visual connects to the verbal and creates a richer whole. In this sense, perhaps we can find musicality in the art and design of any good picture book.

Indeed, the American master of the picture book form, Maurice Sendak, writes in his essay "The Shape of Music" that "...music is the impulse that most stimulates my own work and I invariably sense a musical element in the work of artists I admire, those artists who achieve the authentic liveliness that is the essence of the picture book, a movement that is never still, and that children, I am convinced, recognize and enjoy as something familiar to themselves." In this essay Sendak goes on to explore the musicality of works by such diverse artists as Maurice Boutet de Monvel, Randolph Caldecott, Tomi Ungerer, and William Blake.

Sendak argues, and this writer concurs, that this musicality is apparent not only in illustrations by artists such as Caldecott that convey spirited movement on their own, but also in the pacing of illustrations in sequence throughout the 32-page format of the picture book. For example, Bill Martin, Jr.'s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?* (Henry Holt, 1967), illustrated by Eric Carle, treats viewers to a visual crescendo of sorts at the heart of the book when the spread depicting the white dog uses a rich, black background. In every other double spread before

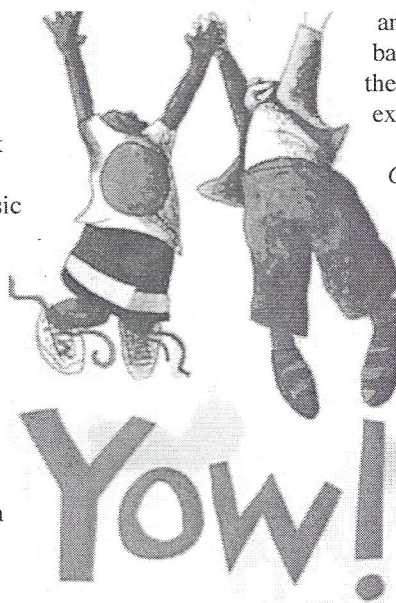


Illustration by Chris Raschka
for *Yo! Yes?* (Scholastic, 1993)

and after this image Carle leaves empty, white backgrounds, and this lends a certain drama to the single, central image that turns this visual expectation on its head.

In another example, Allen Say's *Grandfather's Journey* (Houghton Mifflin, 1993) follows a uniform typography with single page illustrations on each facing page until the final two page openings. The pictures throughout the book are large watercolors with a photographic quality, and they are each framed with thin black lines and a narrow strip of the white page. Brief text for each image lies at the bottom of the page. This all holds true until the penultimate double spread which includes a self-portrait of Say as a young man on the verso page. Rather than offering the viewer a recto page illustration as he does on every other double spread, Say leaves the recto page of this opening devoid of images and instead fills it with words about his grandfather's last years

— years that were spent in Japan and spent longing for one more journey to the United States. It is not until the reader turns the pages that she sees a final, small portrait of Grandfather. The poignancy of this visual pacing is that it allows the closing words, "I think I know my grandfather, I miss him very much," to have a deeper impact on the reader. This is a visual denouement — the last gasp of visual story as the reader prepares to close the book and ruminate on all that she has seen, heard and felt. Placing the final portrait of Grandfather in isolation on the last page of the book, and giving it a much smaller size than all of the other pictures, underscores Say's final, bittersweet commentary on his grandfather's life and death.

But what about children's books that have an explicit, rather than an implicit or metaphorical connection to music? The very rhythms of nursery rhymes beg for (and often have) tunes for singing along and might be considered the next step away from actual songs that have

The FIVE OWLS

Founded in 1986 by Holly Ramsey

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THE FIVE OWLS (ISSN 0892-6735)
is published four times a year by The Jara Society, a not-for-profit
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P.O. Box 235 Marathon, TX 79842, (432) 386-4257, (432) 386-
9087 (fax)

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subscriptions are payable in U.S. dollars. Write for rates on bulk
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parents, authors, illustrators, editors, designers, publishers,
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advocating children's books with integrity: those that can be judged
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THE FIVE OWLS is made possible in part with funding from
the Minnesota Humanities Commission in cooperation with the
National Endowment for the Humanities and the Minnesota State
Legislature. The views expressed here do not necessarily represent
the views of the MHC or the NEH.



Illustration by Allen Say
for *Grandfather's Journey*
(Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993)

been molded into book form. Walter Crane's *The Baby's Opera* (Warne, 1877) was a 19th-century sensation in Great Britain, with musical scores, words, and illustrations collected into a handsome volume for adults and children to share together. Ashley Bryan's *All Night All Day: A Child's First Book of Afro-American Spirituals* (Atheneum, 1991) is a contemporary take on this sort of song book. Meanwhile, his interpretation of *What a Wonderful World* (Atheneum, 1995), Bob Thiele's song made famous by Louis Armstrong, takes just one song and makes it into an auditory and visual feast.

Rosemary Wells is another contemporary illustrator whose use of favorite songs translated into board books provide marvelous springboards between nursery rhymes and stories for the youngest children. Her illustrations for *Itsy-Bitsy Spider* (Scholastic, 1998), *Old MacDonald* (Scholastic, 1998), *Bingo* (Scholastic, 1999), and *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* (Scholastic, 1998) lend characterization and drama to favorite songs and invite children to "read" along with the familiar words. A later collection of favorite Rogers and Hammerstein songs *Getting to Know You* (HarperCollins, 2002) may be a bit more daunting for those unfamiliar with Broadway standbys, but perhaps Wells' inviting volume with its cavorting creatures and

gorgeous colors could trigger readers to acquaint themselves with the show tunes she has included into her book.

Marla Frazee's *Hush Little Baby: A Folksong with Pictures* (Harcourt, 1999), is another fine recent example of songs as picture books. This familiar folksong is little more than a catalog of items (a mockingbird, a diamond ring, a horse and cart, and so on) strung together with a tune, but in Frazee's hands the song turns into a story as her artistic interpretation lends it a narrative. Her triumph lies in the front matter of the book before the familiar text begins. First, a frontispiece illustration sets the stage and introduces the reader to the characters who will populate the book and to the Appalachian setting that Frazee has chosen for her song and picture story. A young girl, whom the reader will recognize from the jacket art, stands just off center of the page. She wears yellow (a color highlighted in the endpapers of the book to train the eye to look for this important color in the illustrations) and glances back over her shoulder at a cart overflowing with stuff. A bearded man with a Santa Claus-esque look about him sits to the side of the cart at rest. On the other side of the girl are two adults, one of whom is carrying a baby — presumably the wailing baby from the jacket art.

Leaving the frontispiece illustration aside the reader turns to the double spread title page, and here the drama emerges in full force. The young girl stands to the far side of the verso page, and she seethes with jealousy as she watches her parents tuck her baby brother into his cradle on the far side of the recto page. The double spread composition of this illustration lends it drama as the figures are not only placed at opposite sides of the page opening, but they are also visually separated by the gutter. Here is a fine example of a picture book artist not only accommodating the gutter in her double spread, but using its presence to inject dramatic tension into her picture. The tension only escalates as the reader turns to the dedication page and sees Frazee's small illustration showing big sister giving the baby's

cradle an angry shove — that's why he is crying on the book jacket and why he needs hushing. That's why big sister is so eager to find something, anything, to soothe him.

Illustrator Chris Raschka is another contemporary artist who, like Frazee, uses the gutter in his double spread picture book illustrations to great effect. His 1994 Caldecott Honor book *Yo! Yes?* (Scholastic, 1993) separates two characters with the gutter on double spread after double spread as they feel one another out, only to have one boy cross the gutter to be on the other's side when they decide to become friends at book's end. In keeping with this article's focus, Raschka is also celebrated for his picture books with a musical bent. In *Charlie Parker Played Be Bop* (Scholastic, 1992) and in his later jazz picture books, *Mysterious Thelonious* (Scholastic, 1997) and *John Coltrane's Giant Steps* (Scholastic, 2002), Raschka is uninterested in presenting biographies of the jazz artists at the center of his works and instead creates concept books on jazz music. His approach is to translate the music itself into the picture book format using visual art properties of color, line, shape and composition to communicate the sound, spirit and rhythms of jazz music in his illustrations, which are bolstered by his considerable skill as a wordsmith.

A musician himself, Raschka was inspired to create *Charlie* (which was released in a board book format this year) by the be bop anthem, "A Night in Tunisia," which features one of Parker's most celebrated virtuoso solos on the alto saxophone. Describing the process of writing the text for this book Raschka states, "I went at it basically from the notion that speech and language are a kind of music, and probably where music comes from — it comes from the rhythms of speech. And so I kind of reversed it and turned the rhythms of music back into speech in the poetry or the lines that I wrote." Indeed, critic Richard Ammon writes, "Most incredible is Raschka's infusion of rhythm into what is an inert form — the picture book," and that rhythm is found not only in Raschka's words, but in his pictures as well.

Furthermore, Parker's music is renowned not only for its rhythms, but also for its elements of humor and surprise, and it is the successful incorporation of this playful spirit into the rhythm of Raschka's words that makes *Charlie* so remarkable. Indeed, Raschka is quoted on the book's jacket saying that he wanted children to learn that "...Charlie Parker and be bop had something to do with rhythm, surprise, and humor." In *Charlie* (and in all of Raschka's picture books) text and art are highly dependent upon one another, resulting in images that play off words, and vice versa, leading critic Bill Ott to second Ammon's praise and state, "Like a good bass player,

his words set the rhythm, and like a saxophone solo, his pictures deliver the surprise and the humor."

The text immediately captures readers with the spirit of Parker's music as it begins: "Charlie Parker played be bop. / Charlie Parker played saxophone. / The music sounded like be bop. / Never leave your cat alone." Raschka goes on to communicate the playful tone of Parker's music by cleverly drawing on the saxophonist's nickname, Yardbird or Bird, and on words from various songs in his repertoire to build up a series of nonsense words mimicking the sounds of jazz instruments. These words take on syncopated rhythm moving the reader through the pages at a lively, quickening pace: "Be bop. Fisk, fisk. / Lollipop. Boomba, boomba. / Bus stop. Zzznnzznn. / Boppitty, bippity, bop. BANG!"

Meanwhile, Raschka's illustrations visually interpret Parker's music and Raschka's own verbal translation of this music. The opening three double spreads feature verso page illustrations at various angles depicting Charlie Parker playing his saxophone. Meanwhile, on the bottom right corner of each recto page, a small illustration of an overshoe marching along on its own two feet steadily urges the reader to turn the page for the next visage, even as it foreshadows its own place in the surprising, humorous, nonsense verses to come. It is not until the thirteenth double spread that readers can firmly connect the overshoes with the text, as the words read "Overshoes, overshoes, overshoes, o / Reeti-footi, reeti-footi, reeti-footi, ree," and across the gutter the reader sees the diligent row of overshoes carrying on its recto page march toward the next double spread.

Many other picture book artists have successfully worked to translate sound and music into visual imagery. Eric Carle's *I See a Song* (Crowell, 1973) depicts sound through visual art with expert use of color, shape, line and composition. This nearly-wordless picture book begs viewers to lend their own vocal interpretations to the pictures — indeed, many storytimes at the Eric Carle Museum have been graced by children singing the pictures.

Rachel Isadora's *Ben's Trumpet* (Greenwillow, 1979) depicts the sounds emanating from the Zig Zag Jazz Club and Ben's own imagined music-making with lines that zig and zag across the pages. After neighborhood children tease Ben for his imaginary play chiding, "Man you're

crazy! You got no trumpet!" Isadora depicts Ben's hurt and his silenced imaginary music with lines that take on a vertical, downward reaching angle. These lines lack the vitality and visual noise that their predecessors invoke; they communicate Ben's pain and the shutting down of his musical dreams.

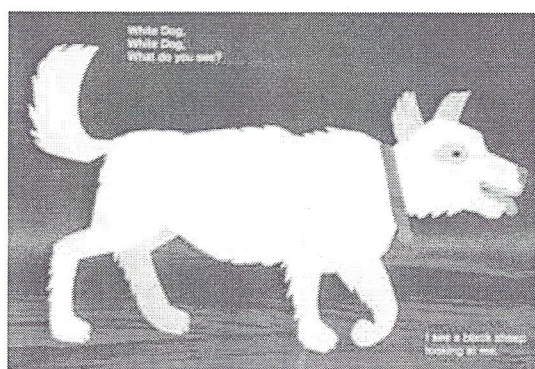


Illustration by Eric Carle for Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993)

Meanwhile, Mordicai Gerstein's *What Charlie Heard* (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2002) communicates a veritable cacophony of sound throughout its exuberant pages telling the life story of composer Charles Ives. Words, punctuation, color, and line imposed upon the illustrations visually communicate all of the sounds that filled Ives's life and informed his compositions. The dramatic emptiness of the double spread depicting the Ives's loss of his beloved father powerfully underscores the accompanying text, "Charlie heard a great silence." No other picture in the book is as empty as this one is — empty of color, sound, and of life, but filled with heart-wrenching emotion.

And so Gerstein succeeds in not only demystifying the music, but the musician himself in this book. A look back to Karla Kuskin and Marc Simont's *The Philharmonic Gets Dressed* (Harper & Row, 1982) gives us an earlier nod toward demystifying musicians as the reader sees the orchestra members prepare for their concert. The preparations include showering, dressing, and transporting themselves and their instruments to the concert hall — an implicit message to the reader that all of her violin lessons might turn into a career one day. This, unlike Gerstein's book, certainly couldn't be deemed biography; but it opens the door to the possibility of learning about the lives of actual musicians — they put their pants on one leg at a time just like everybody else, it announces.

Today's child readers are fortunate to have scores of outstanding musician's biographies to choose from. Kathleen Krull's 1993 Boston Globe Horn Book Honor Book, *Lives of the Musicians: Good Times, Bad Times (And What the Neighbors Thought)* (Harcourt, 1993) is a marvelous collective biography of 16 musicians ranging from Antonio Vivaldi to Scott Joplin. Krull demonstrated here and in her other books that she is an expert at pulling together facts and anecdotes into a succinct portrait that humanizes larger than life figures.

A Band of Angels: A Story Inspired by the Jubilee Singers (Atheneum, 1999) by Deborah Hopkinson tells a fictionalized account of the true but little known story of a group of young African American men and women who formed a singing group to raise money for Fisk University. Husband and wife team Andrea Davis Pinkney and Brian Pinkney collaborated on two picture books about better known African American musicians in the 1999 Caldecott Honor Winner *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra* (Hyperion, 1998) and in *Ella Fitzgerald: The Tale of a Vocal Virtuosa* (Hyperion, 2002). The year 2002 was a banner year for musician biographies in the Boston Globe Horn Book Award nonfiction category: *This Land was Made for You and Me: The Life and Songs of Woody Guthrie* (Viking, 2002) by Elizabeth Partridge was the award winner, and *Handel, Who Knew What He Liked* (Candlewick, 2001) written by M.T. Anderson and *Woody Guthrie: Poet of the People* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2001) written and illustrated by Bonnie Christensen were chosen as the two honor books. In 2003 Pam Munoz Ryan's *When Marian Sang* (Scholastic, 2002) was selected as a Robert F.

Sibert Honor Book.

A final turn toward children's novels featuring musical themes finds no dearth of quality examples. First of all, many novels, even if they do not focus wholly on musical subjects use songs in one way or another to convey mood and setting. Mildred Taylor's celebrated novels about the Logan family, *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* (Dial, 1976) and *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (Dial 1981), both take their titles from African American spirituals; and who can think of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series without thinking of Pa and his fiddle?

Of course, other novels for young readers take music as their primary focus. Carol Fenner's 1995 Newbery Honor Book, *Yolonda's Genius* (McElderry, 1995), tells the story of a young girl determined to herald her brother's musical giftedness even as he is labeled a slow learner by everyone around them. Patricia MacLachlan's *The Facts and Fictions of Minna Pratt* (Harper & Row, 1988) also looks at giftedness in the musical realm as she explores one girl's coming of age and family relationships throughout the novel. Minna is the talented young cellist at the center of this book, and she comes to appreciate her family's quirkiness and her own foibles as she fosters a friendship with another talented young musician, Lucas. Notably, this novel presents gifted characters in a positive light rather than portraying them as freakish or isolated.

Older fans of MacLachlan's Minna may turn to Bruce Brooks's *Midnight Hour Encores* (Harper & Row, 1986), a young adult novel about another young cellist. Virginia Euwer Wolff chooses to write about a young violinist in *The Mozart Season* (Holt, 1991). Finally, a different sort of musical scene is explored in Francesca Lia Block's young adult novel *Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys* (HarperCollins, 1993) as Cherokee Bat, her "almost sister" Witch Baby, Angel Juan, and Raphael form a rock band while their parents are away filming a movie in South America. Block's characteristic style incorporating magical realism and imagist writing uses the music scene at the heart of this novel to comment on gritty social themes without ever emerging as heavy-handed.

All of these novels and the aforementioned informational and picture books claim music as fertile ground for children's literature. And why not? Beginning with lullabies and the music inherently found in nursery rhymes, poetry, and in everyday speech, music emerges as an integral part of children's lives; it only follows that their books should sing out musical stories and pictures as their eyes dance across the pages.

Megan Lambert earned her BA at Smith College and her MA in Children's Literature at Simmons College. She is the Literature and Outreach Coordinator at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, MA and has taught children's literature as an adjunct instructor at the Center for the Study of Children's Literature at Simmons College; Bay Path College; and at The Institute for Art Education at UMASS Dartmouth. A reviewer for The Five Owls, Megan's reviews and articles have also appeared in Bookbird Magazine, Riverbank Review, CREArTA, and Children's Literature.

Music and Children's Literature

A Bibliography

by Megan Lambert

PICTURE BOOKS

All Night, All Day: A Child's First Book of Afro-American Spirituals

by Ashley Bryan

Atheneum, 1991, 0689316623

An illustrated songbook of 20 African American Spirituals with 12 accompanying paintings.

A Band of Angels: A Story Inspired by the Jubilee Singers by Deborah

Hopkinson, illustrated by Raul Colon

Atheneum, 1999, 0689810628

A fictionalized account of a group of young African American men and women who went on a concert tour in 1871 to raise money for the struggling Fisk University. They helped to introduce African American spirituals to a broader audience and Hopkinson's and Colon's work aims to re-introduce their efforts to all of us.

Bunny Reads Back Series by Rosemary Wells, including:

The Bear Went Over the Mountain, Scholastic, 1998, 059002910X;

Bingo, Scholastic, 1999, 0590029134;

The Itsy Bitsy Spider, Scholastic, 1998, 0590029118;

Old MacDonald, Scholastic, 1998, 0590769855

A board book collection intended to make reading accessible and exciting for the very youngest children.

Ben's Trumpet by Rachel Isadora

Greenwillow Books, 1979, 0688801943

Isadora's picture book about a young boy who dreams of playing the trumpet is appropriately set in the jazz age. Striking black and white illustrations and a touching ending combine to create a book that has stood the test of time despite some controversy over the depiction of Ben's family.

Charlie Parker Played Be Bop by Chris Raschka

Scholastic, 1992, 0531059995

A concept book on the sound of jazz music, this picture book communicates the spontaneity, humor, rhythm, and joy of Parker's music through words and image.

Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra

by Andrea Davis Pinkney, illustrated by Brian Pinkney

Hyperion, 1998, 0786801786

A picture book biography of Duke Ellington with scratchboard and acrylic illustrations that evoke the rhythm and swing of Ellington's orchestral music.

Ella Fitzgerald: The Tale of a Vocal Virtuosa by Andrea Davis Pinkney,

illustrated by Brian Pinkney

Hyperion, 2002, 0786805684

Narrated by a zoot-suit wearing feline named Scat Cat Monroe, this picture book biography is separated into four "tracks" (chapters) that follow Fitzgerald's rise from a small town girl to the First Lady of Song.



*Illustration by Ashley Bryan
for All Night, All Day*



*Illustration by Brian Pinkney
for Duke Ellington: The Piano
Prince and His Orchestra*

Getting to Know You: Rodgers and Hammerstein Favorites

by Rosemary Wells

HarperCollins Publishers, 2002, 0060279257

This handsome collection's intent is to reacquaint, or even introduce readers to classic show tunes. Wells' vibrantly colored illustrations are inviting and a small booklet with the musical scores help to make the songs more accessible.



*Illustration by Brian Selznick
for When Marian Sang*

Handel, Who Knew What He Liked by M.T. Anderson, illustrated by Kevin Hawkes

Candlewick, 2001, 0763610461

A picture book biography of George Frideric Handel that portrays him as a stubborn little boy who grows up to become a determined and inspired composer. Hawkes' lush acrylic illustrations display humor, triumph and grandeur.

Hush Little Baby: A Folksong with Pictures by Marla Frazee

Harcourt, 1999, 0152014292

Through Frazee's expressive pictures a folksong becomes a story in this marvelous picture book interpretation of a classic song.

I See a Song by Eric Carle

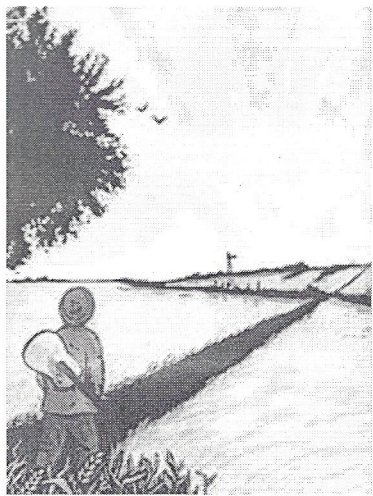
Penguin Books, 1973, 0241023777

This almost wordless picture book attempts to make sound visible. A violinist steps on stage and colors, shapes, and pictures emerge on the pages as he plays his music.

John Coltrane's Giant Steps by Chris Raschka

Atheneum, 2002, 0689845987

The most recent of Raschka's jazz picture books, this title casts a raindrop, a snowflake, a box and a kitten as different parts of a Coltrane composition. Working together they create a visual representation of Coltrane's famed "sheets of sound."



*Illustration by Bonnie Christensen
for Woody Guthrie: Poet of
the People*

Mysterious Thelonious by Chris Raschka

Orchard Books, 1997, 0531300579

Raschka's second jazz picture book assigns each note on the musical scale a color from the chromatic scale. He then arranges these colors onto the page with the text and illustrations of Monk so that the pictures could actually be played as a musical score.

The Philharmonic Gets Dressed by Karla Kuskin, illustrated by Marc Simont

HarperCollins, 1982, 0060236221

This picture book humorously demystifies the lives of musicians as Kuskin and Simont depict the very human preparations that all 105 members of the Philharmonic must make before giving a concert on a winter's evening.

What a Wonderful World by George David Weiss and Bob Thiele, illustrated by Ashley Bryan

Atheneum, 1995, 0689800878

In this picture book treatment of the song made famous by Louis Armstrong, Bryan has children and Armstrong perform a puppet show inspired by the song's lyrics.

What Charlie Heard by Mordicai Gerstein

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002, 0374382921

A picture book biography of composer Charles Ives. Gerstein's vibrant, busy, innovative illustrations succeed in making visible the everyday sounds that served as Ives's inspiration.

When Marian Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson

by Pam Munoz Ryan, illustrated by Brian Selznick
Scholastic, 2002, 0439269679

A picture book biography of the famed contralto. Selznick fittingly conceived his illustrations as a set for an opera, and his sepia toned pictures evoke just the right drama and emotion to fit with Ryan's informative and lyrical text.

Woody Guthrie: Poet of the People by Bonnie Christensen

Knopf, 2001, 0375811133

A picture book biography illustrated in a mixed media technique that simulates woodcuts.

FOR OLDER READERS

Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys by Francesca Lia Block

HarperCollins, 1992, 0060202696

One installment in Block's *Dangerous Angels* series, this novel follows the lives of four teenagers who form a rock band while their parents are away and end up with a bit more freedom and power than they can handle.

The Facts and Fictions of Minna Pratt by Patricia MacLachlan

Harper & Row, 1988, 0060241179

Eleven year old Minna, a gifted cellist, befriends another young musician and begins to find a new appreciation for her somewhat eccentric family and for herself.

Lives of the Musicians: Good Times, Bad Times (And What the Neighbors Thought) by Kathleen Krull

Harcourt, 1993, 0152480102

An engaging collective biography illuminating the lives of sixteen musicians ranging from Antonio Vivaldi to Scott Joplin.

Midnight Hour Encores by Bruce Brooks

Harper & Row, 1986, 0062627094

Sibilance T. Spooner, a sixteen-year-old musical prodigy, decides to find the mother who abandoned her as a baby and travels cross-country with her father to find her.

The Mozart Season by Virginia Euwer Wolff

Henry Holt, 1991, 080501571X

Twelve-year-old Allegra spends a summer practicing to play a violin concerto in a competition. As she prepares for the competition, Allegra grows not only as a musician but as a person coming of age in her relationships with her friends and family

This Land was Made for You and Me: The Life and Songs of Woody Guthrie by Elizabeth Partridge

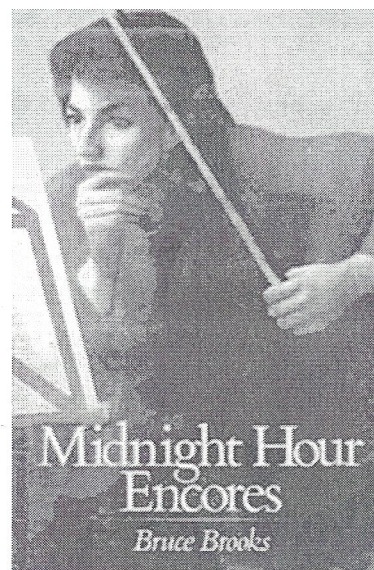
Viking, 2002, 0670035351

This stellar biography includes a chronological narrative of Guthrie's life and ample photographs and reproductions of primary sources for readers including notes and drawings by Guthrie.

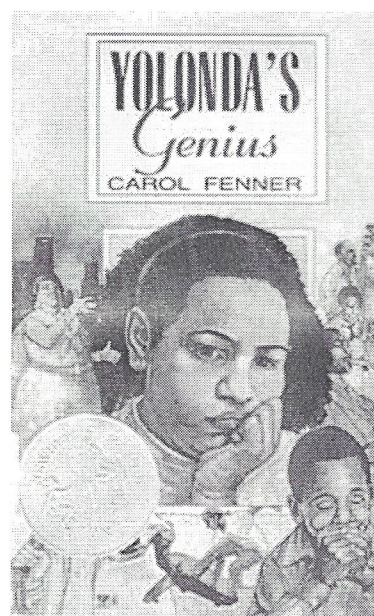
Yolonda's Genius by Carol Fenner

Margaret McElderry Books, 1995, 0689800010

Yolonda is determined to prove that her harmonica-playing younger brother Andrew is a musical genius, especially since everyone around them is ready to discount him as a slow learner.



Cover illustration for
Midnight Hour Encores



Cover illustration for
Yolonda's Genius