



Classroom Guide for **RAY CHARLES**

by **Sharon Bell Mathis**
illustrated by **George Ford**

Reading Level

Interest Level: Grades K-5

Reading Level: Grades 2-3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.3/1.0

Lexile Measure®: 420

Scholastic Reading Counts!™: 3.4

Themes

Music/Musicians, Jazz, Overcoming Hardship, African American History

Synopsis

The story of Ray Charles Robinson is one of formidable challenges and incredible successes. Born in 1930, Ray Charles lost his eyesight to disease when he was seven. He was subsequently sent to St. Augustine School for the Blind in Florida. Because he did not have shoes, the other children called him Foots, and they played cruel tricks on the barefoot boy. However, it was at this school that Charles learned Braille and figured out how to pursue his interest in music. As he got older, he wrote Braille arrangements of melodies for bands and together with schoolmates began playing at public functions. After the death of his mother when he was 15, Charles left the school and took jobs playing with local dance bands. He moved to Seattle at age 16 and was soon playing in clubs, eventually forming his own trio. His first hit record was "I Got a Woman." It was followed by many other popular recordings including "Georgia on My Mind," now the official song of that state. After those early, difficult days of childhood, Ray Charles became world famous and won a multitude of awards and honors for his legendary artistic achievements.

Background

Ray Charles was a world-renowned singer, composer, arranger, and instrumentalist who also played the piano, saxophone, clarinet, and organ. His music blended gospel, jazz, rhythm and blues, and pop. Charles is also a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Charles' journey to fame began at the beginning of the Great Depression in rural Georgia where segregation was firmly in place. African Americans were discriminated against in housing, schooling, jobs, transportation, hotels, hospitals, and every other area of human life. At the age of five, Charles contracted glaucoma, but the kind of specialized care that might have helped him was unavailable to his poor African American family. A year later his diseased left eye was removed. By the time he was seven, Charles had lost the sight in his right eye and was totally blind. Glaucoma is characterized by an increased pressure of the fluid within the eye. If untreated, the pressure destroys the optic nerve and causes blindness. Glaucoma is the leading cause of blindness in the United States and worldwide.

Although Charles' mother, Retha, could not save his eyesight, she was determined to help him succeed in life. She nurtured in Charles a strong desire for knowledge, learning, and self-sufficiency. She encouraged him to have hope in the future, and hope for a better future meant Charles had to leave home to attend a boarding school for blind children.

More information about Ray Charles' life and achievements can be found on many Internet sites.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before reading the book, you may wish to have students discuss one or more of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. What are your five senses? How do you use each sense? Why are they so important to us?
2. What is a biography? Why are biographies interesting to read? What other biographies have you read?
3. What are your strengths? What are you good at? How do you use your talents and abilities?
4. What are your dreams for the future? What do you think you can do to achieve them? What obstacles might you face? How will you overcome them?
5. What does "legendary" mean? How do you think people become legendary?

Teaching Tip

You may wish to feature this book as part of your celebration of Black History Month, which is observed in February.

Exploring the Book

Invite students to examine the cover. Ask them to comment on the images shown. Pose questions such as: What is the young boy doing? How does he feel about this activity? Why is the man wearing dark eyeglasses? What do you see reflected in his glasses? Do you think the boy and the man are the same person? Why or why not?

Read the title of the book and ask students to share what they know about Ray Charles. Then draw students' attention to the Author's Note at the beginning of the book and the Afterword at the end. Explain that this book was originally published in 1973, more than thirty years ago. Many things happened to Ray Charles after 1973. The author added the Author's Note and Afterword to tell readers some of the most important things that happened. The Afterword also notes that Ray Charles passed away in 2004 at the age of 73.

Share with students the information in the Background section of this guide and the Author's Note in the book. If appropriate, explain in more detail the Great Depression and the racial situation at the time of Ray Charles' childhood.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students write in their reading journals some things they hope to learn about Ray Charles from this biography.

Play a recording of Ray Charles singing one or two of his songs for the class. Play the songs a few times as students think about what they can learn about Ray Charles' music from the book.

Vocabulary

The following words have special or particular meanings in this story. Many may also be new to students.

gospel	jazz	classical	rhythm arrangement
melodypitch	harmony	sharp	blues

Have students explore the meanings of these words as they relate to music. Students may also wish to play recordings of various kinds of music that demonstrate the meanings of the words or that serve as examples.

AFTER READING ACTIVITIES**Discussion Questions**

After reading the book, use these questions to generate discussion and expand students' understanding of the text. Encourage students to refer back to the text to support their responses.

1. Why does the author begin this biography with the story of Foothills? What does this story tell you about Ray Charles?
2. The other children at St. Augustine School are also blind. Why do you think they were so mean to Ray Charles?

3. What obstacles did Ray Charles face at age seven? What additional obstacles did he face at age 15?
4. Who were the people important to Ray in his early life? What roles did they play in shaping his life?
5. How did Ray Charles learn to read and write music? What was his music like?
6. Why do you think Ray Charles wanted to go so far away when he left Florida?
7. Why did Ray Charles shorten his name? Do you think that was a smart decision? Why or why not?
8. What are some examples of Charles' commitment to his work? How does the author show that he has high standards?
9. What do you think it would be like to work for Ray Charles?
10. What are some examples of how Ray Charles functioned like a sighted person on an everyday level? Why didn't he just pay people to do things for him?
11. Why did Ray Charles once refuse to play a concert in Georgia? What did that show about him?
12. What are the things that made Ray Charles great? Why?

Literature Circles*

Have students refer back to the word charts they made before reading the book. Ask students to discuss the meaning of each word and how the word is used in the story. Have volunteers check their meanings against the dictionary meanings. Other meanings of the words may also be discussed.

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to those in the Discussion Question section of this guide to help students explore the story.
- The **Passage Locator** might find examples of problems that Ray Charles faced and the solutions he used.
- The **Illustrator** might draw pictures to show the feelings evoked by Ray Charles' music.
- The **Connector** might find other books that describe the times in which Ray Charles grew up.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might find more information—news articles and reviews—about Ray Charles today.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Two such books you may wish to refer to are: *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 1994) and *Literature Circles Resource Guide* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Other Writing Activities

Ask students to respond to one or more of the following writing activities.

1. Have students work in small groups to write a list of questions they would like to have asked Ray Charles about his life or his music.
2. Ask students to pretend that they were invited to introduce Ray Charles to an audience before one of his concerts. Have students write the introduction they would have used.
3. Tell students to imagine that they can go back in time. Have them write some advice to the children who called Ray Charles "Foots" and who played such a mean prank on him at St. Augustine School.
4. Students might do research papers on how life has changed for people without sight from the 1930s to today. Ask students to discuss things that have not changed as well.
5. Interested students might write reviews of a Ray Charles recording.
6. At the end of the book, the author mentions that Ray Charles recalled certain colors. Challenge students to write a paragraph describing a particular color to someone who cannot see.

ELL/ESL Teaching Strategies

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Play recordings by Ray Charles to illustrate his field, his particular music, and selected words in the text.
2. Have these students work with strong English speakers to read and act out passages from the book.
3. Work with ESL students to make a chart showing the good things and the bad things that happened to Ray Charles. Use the chart to review concepts and words.

Teaching Tip

The author tells the story of Ray Charles in both the present and past tenses. After talking with students about why she does this, have them identify examples of both tenses in the book.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

To integrate students' reading experiences with other subject areas, you may wish to have students complete some of the following activities.

Music

1. Hold a Ray Charles concert. Borrow from the library or have students bring in their own recordings and videos of Ray Charles. Include examples that represent the wide variety of Charles' music.
2. Remind students that Ray Charles had perfect pitch. Ask a music teacher or students who are knowledgeable about music to explain what pitch is and how it is used in music.
3. Have students use photographs or real instruments to create a display of the instruments Ray Charles played: piano, saxophone, clarinet, and organ. If possible, have someone demonstrate how these instruments are played.

Art

Have students make posters to advertise their Ray Charles concert (see Music activity #1 above). Students may wish to listen to the music before designing their posters, to help them decide what to illustrate. Exhibit the completed posters.

Social Studies

1. Review map skills with students. Ask them to explain why Ray Charles' friend described how far different cities were from St. Augustine in terms of inches on a map. Then have students locate these places on a United States map: Albany, Georgia; Atlanta, Georgia; St. Augustine, Florida; Greenville, Florida; Seattle, Washington; Los Angeles, California; New York, New York. Finally, ask students to use the key and scale of miles on the map to determine how far these cities are from one another.
2. Interested students might research one of the following and report to the class: the Apollo Theater in Harlem, New York; Louis Braille; Sugar Ray Robinson.

Science

Ray Charles said, "My eyes are my handicap, but my ears are my opportunity." Explore sight and hearing, as well as other senses, with students. Use simple experiments to help students appreciate how humans rely on these senses and how people must compensate when one sense is impaired.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

Sharon Bell Mathis won the Coretta Scott King Author Award in 1974 for *Ray Charles*. Her numerous other titles include *Teacup Full of Roses* (ALA Notable Book), *Listen for the Fig Tree*, *The Hundred Penny Box* (Newberry Honor Book), and *Running Girl: the Diary of Ebonee Rose*.

Mathis says that "writing happened to me." She explains that she grew up in a house with a poet, her mother. "Watching her write poems made me believe that it was fun and something I might try." So Mathis began writing stories and poems in elementary school. After college, she became a special education teacher and a library media specialist, and she continued writing. Today it is her full-time occupation. Of this book, Mathis says, "*Ray Charles* is a tale of human will overcoming horrendous obstacles. Obstacles such as Jim Crow laws which denied African Americans the rights and privileges of full citizenship, obstacles of discrimination and segregation, obstacles of poverty, blindness

and ignorance. It is a story of human triumph. . . . *Ray Charles* is the story of a man. I believe there are lessons to be learned." Mathis lives in Fort Washington, Maryland.

George Ford was the first recipient of the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award for his illustrations in *Ray Charles*. He has illustrated more than 30 books for children, including *Paul Robeson* (Jane Addams Peace Award) and *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Coles. His work has also appeared in magazines and at museum exhibitions.

Ford says of his work, "For me—an illustrator whose subject is the portrayal of black life and black children—it's important to use the text as a beginning, an opportunity to arouse in myself and express to my readers those human qualities that have helped us to survive this long—those qualities that are positive, full of energy and life force and enthusiasm." Ford was born in Brooklyn, New York, but spent part of his early childhood in Barbados, his parents' homeland. There he was influenced by his grandmother who drew portraits on slate with chalk, and by his sister, a children's librarian. Ford is now back in Brooklyn, where he lives with his wife.

Awards, Reviews & Comments

- **1974 Coretta Scott King Author Award**
- **Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award**
- **"Choices,"** Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)

"The music of Ray Charles 'tells about love and pain and joy and trouble' and so do the events of his life.... [This] biography ... details the heroism in Ray Charles' life." —*The Horn Book*

Please see our Web site, for an update-to-date, complete listing of awards and reviews at: <http://www.leeandlow.com/books/ray.html>

Resources on the Web

Learn more about *Ray Charles* at:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/96/hc/ray_charles

View other **Active Reader Classroom Guides** at:

http://www.leeandlow.com/p/teachers-african_american.mhtml

BookTalk with George Ford:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/ford.mhtml>

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