

**Classroom Guide for**  
***THE PALM OF MY HEART:***  
***POETRY BY AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN***  
 edited by **Davida Adedjouma**  
 illustrated by **R. Gregory Christie**

**Reading Level**

Reading-aloud Level: Grade 2

Interest Level: Grades 1–6

Guided Reading Level: M

**Themes:**

Family, Self-Esteem, Cultural Heritage/Pride, African American Interest

**National Standards:**

SOCIAL STUDIES: Culture; Individual Development and Identity

LANGUAGE ARTS: Understanding the Human Experience; Multicultural Understanding; Communication Skills

**Synopsis**

Included in this book are twenty poems by African American children, ages eight to fourteen. Composed in “simple, humble passages that reflect children who have discovered the power of the written word,” the anthology is a celebration of blackness and the beauty of the writers’ lives and culture.

**Background**

Says Davida Adedjouma, editor of *THE PALM OF MY HEART*, “Achievement is not reached individually, but through collective force.” The poems she collected for this book are the result of writing workshops she conducted with children from the Inner City Youth League and the African-American Academy for Accelerated Learning (AAAL), both located in Minnesota’s Twin Cities. In these workshops children learned the techniques of imagery, narrative, and dialogue, and were then set free to explore their own lives, feelings, and imaginations through words.

**Teaching Tip**

THE PALM OF MY HEART would be an inspiring addition to your poetry selections for April, National Poetry Month.

**BEFORE READING****Prereading Focus Questions**

Before introducing the book, share the background information with students. Then you may wish to explore one or more of the following questions with them.

1. What kinds of poetry do you enjoy? What is your favorite poem? Why do you like it?
2. Does poetry always rhyme? What are some of the other forms poems might take?
3. What are the things you are proud of or thankful for?
4. How do you show your feelings? What would it be like to express them in a poem? Have you ever tried this? What was the experience like?

**Exploring the Book**

Display the book and read aloud the title. Ask students what they think the title means.

Lead students in a “book walk.” Draw attention to the way type is used in the poems. Discuss the effect of the dark type. Help students see that the bold type catches the eye of the reader and emphasizes certain words and thoughts.

Call attention to the interior illustrations and invite students to comment on them. Ask students to contribute words that describe the pictures. You might suggest *bold*, *colorful*, *powerful* to get them started.

**Setting a Purpose for Reading**

Have students read to find out what the title of the book means and to discover the feelings expressed in the poems.

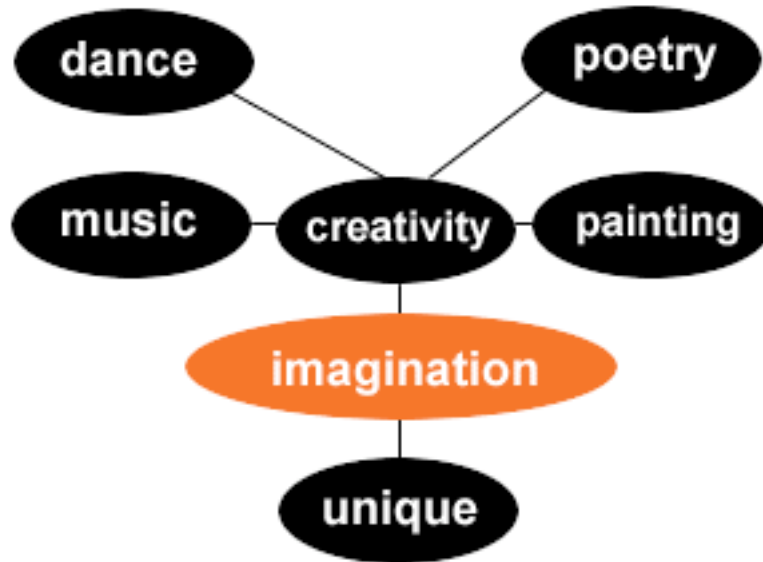
**VOCABULARY**

The following words found in THE PALM OF MY HEART may give students difficulty. Write the words on the chalkboard. Then have students work in teams to look up each word and define it. Next ask students to locate the word in the book and note how it is used. Finally, have students make a web for each word to show more about it.

culture  
ancestors

symbol  
energetic

freedom  
eternal arch



### AFTER READING

#### Discussion Questions

After students have read the poems, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop an appreciation of the poetry. Encourage students to refer to passages or illustrations in the book to support their responses.

1. What is the common thread in these poems?
2. How does the bold, black type affect the way you read these poems?
3. How do the illustrations add to the poems?
4. What are some things that are important to the poets?
5. How do the poets feel about themselves?
6. Why is poetry a good way to express feelings?

#### Literature Circles

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 Questions section or pose questions specific to each poem.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines or phrases that reveal certain feelings such as pride or joy.
- The **Illustrator** might draw pictures showing his or her personal interpretation of one or more of the poems.
- The **Connector** might find other poems about black pride.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.

- The **Investigator** might look for other poems written by young people.

\*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

### **Reader's Response**

Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize what they have read. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, oral discussion, drawings, or essays.

1. Which poem in this book is your favorite? Why?
2. Which illustration do you like the best? Why?
3. Which poem do you think was the hardest for the poet to write? Why?
4. Reread the poems. Which ones suggest joy? Pride? Thankfulness? What emotions are expressed in other poems?
5. How do the poems help you experience the feelings of the poets?

### **Other Writing Activities**

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for students to share and discuss their work.

1. Write a letter to one of the poets telling why you like his or her poem and how it makes you feel.
2. Introduce similes and metaphors. Explain that a simile is a comparison of unlike things using the word *like* or *as*. Give as an example this simile from the book: "Black hands . . . wiggle . . . like the wind."
3. Teach that metaphors are comparisons made without the use of *like* or *as*. Give as an example this metaphor from the book: "Black culture is a secret shared in the night."
4. Ask students to look for additional similes and metaphors in the poems. Then challenge them to write their own similes and metaphors.
5. Let students write a poem expressing how they feel about something that is of interest or importance to them. They may use a format similar to one used in the book or one of their own choosing. After students have finished their

poems, encourage them to write short biographies of themselves, similar to the ones on the About the Poets page at the back of the book.

### **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. Make audiotapes of students reading the poems aloud. Invite English language learners to read along as they listen.
2. Pair strong English readers with ELL students to read and discuss the poems.
3. Use small sticky notes to label pictures illustrating concrete nouns in the book. For example, you might label these items: fence, church, stairs, girl, dress, boy, musician, trombone, trumpet, microphone, hand, drum, chair, lamp, bureau, rug, sign, building, baby, family, table, stilts. Keep a list of the words you label and challenge students to find each item as you call it out.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES**

To help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas, you might try some of the following activities.

#### **Language Arts**

1. Introduce or review poetry devices such as rhyme, repetition, personification, and onomatopoeia. Give the following examples from the book, then challenge students to write their own examples.

Rhyme	“ . . . a dance in the sand, a song from a faraway land.”
Repetition	“Black is dark, dark is lovely”
Personification	“ . . . letters printed in a book sitting there . . . ”
Onomatopoeia	“They wiggle, <i>wwwhhh</i> , like the wind.”

2. Remind students that the poems in this book are all about the color black and what it represents to the poets. Have students choose another color and write a poem or story featuring that hue.

#### **Social Studies**

In her introduction to the book, Lucille Clifton refers to a time when the word “Black” was considered “fighting language.” Interested students might research the different ways this word has been used in the history of African Americans. Students might present their findings on a timeline or as a bulletin board display.

**Music**

Point out that the lyrics to many popular songs are also poetry. Ask students to bring in the words to a favorite song. Analyze the lyrics. Do they rhyme? Are any poetic devices used? What is their message? What feelings are expressed?

**ABOUT THE EDITOR**

**Davida Adedjouma** is a writer, actor, and teacher. Born in Chicago, she now lives in New York City. Adedjouma has been the recipient of numerous literary awards and grants, including a Bush Foundation Individual Artist Fellowship. *THE PALM OF MY HEART* is her first book for children. Other publications include *Last Summer*, a collection of short stories. Of her work teaching writing to children, Adedjouma says, "Children's voices in this country are seldom heard. We adults 'speak' for them, 'to' them, and 'about' them. I want to offer a vehicle for children to express who they are, in their own words."

**ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR**

**R. Gregory Christie** is a three-time winner of the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award Honor for his books *THE PALM OF MY HEART* and *BROTHERS IN HOPE*, published by Lee & Low Books, and *ONLY PASSING THROUGH*. He was born and raised in New Jersey and received his fine arts degree from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Christie's artwork has appeared in numerous commercial publications, including *The New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, *The New Yorker*, *Parenting* magazine, and on many CD album covers. Other books he has illustrated for Lee & Low include *LOVE TO LANGSTON*, *RICHARD WRIGHT AND THE LIBRARY CARD*, and *DESHAWN DAYS*.

*THE PALM OF MY HEART* has received numerous awards and honors. These include:

- Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award Honor
- Reading Magic Award, *Parenting* magazine
- Best Books of the Year, *Parenting* magazine
- "Choices," Cooperative Children's Books Center
- Firecracker Alternative Press Award for Children's Literature
- Children's Books Mean Business, Children's Book Council
- Not Just for Children Anymore selection, Children's Book Council

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