

blues journey

by Walter Dean Myers • illustrated by Christopher Myers • Holiday House, New York 2003



Reviewed by
Mahala Bundy

Walter Dean Myers has collected public domain blues lyrics and arranged them as a poetic anthology with illustrations by Christopher

Myers. The verses are placed one or two per page turn and are not too numerous to read at one sitting. For those interested in information, there is a succinctly phrased introduction about blues form and its origins and history. Following the text and illustrations is a timeline of events and individuals seminal in the development of the blues and a glossary of pertinent vocabulary and symbolism. As the title suggests, the reader can trace the lines of African-American history from arrival on the continent to modern urban life.

The book elegantly demonstrates blues as poetry. In his introduction he relates how the AAB stanza is a version of ancestral African call-and-response. Exiled from native land and kin, long-exposed to Western individualism, the singer addresses the call to himself and answers it himself. Thus blues as a contemplative art form:

*Pain will push and poke you,
despair will scrape the bone*

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despair will scrape the bone*

*Misery loves company, blues can
live alone*

The singer repeats the first line for emphasis. Shades of meaning (including suspense) give the listener time to consider its implications. The third line, in an economy of form that rivals haiku, completes the feeling of the first two lines, fills in missing information, and adds commentary. The crux

of the form is the tonal shift between the second and third lines, comparable to the change of tone in the couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet.

It is clear here that blues has body and soul, and the word is the soul around which the musical body developed and matured. Take heed, music teachers who are tempted to introduce blues as a 12-bar chord progression! Myers describes the pentatonic scale, inherited from Africa and seasoned with additional tones, as the defining musical characteristic of the blues and makes no mention of the harmonic structure so dear to teachers.

Permeating the book are fine, three-color illustrations, in blue ink, white paint, and brown paper bags. Their muted, tonal effect is only one of many ways in which they parallel the subtleties of the lyrics. Visual art here supplies the immediacy of music. Christopher Myers has thoroughly explored the use of his materials. Faces and figures appear in blue and white, reminiscent of exposed photo-

graphic paper, or in brown and indigo; a more lifelike, but emotionally distant effect. When figures in each set of colors coexist in the same painting, they seem to occupy different times or worlds of feeling.

The relation of painting to text is enticingly oblique and serves to deepen the poetry. A good example is a page bearing the two verses below. It shows women silhouetted behind shroud-like white sheets as they hang wash on a line:

*Blackbirds fly, hound dogs howl
and bark*

*Yes, blackbirds fly, you know
hound dogs howl and bark*

*I see my true love sitting, crying in
the dark*

*and
Blues, won't you free me, let all
this suffering cease?*

*Said blues, won't you free me, let
all this suffering cease?*

*Give me a feather pillow and let
me rest in peace*

Opposite is one of the most striking

continues on page 45

