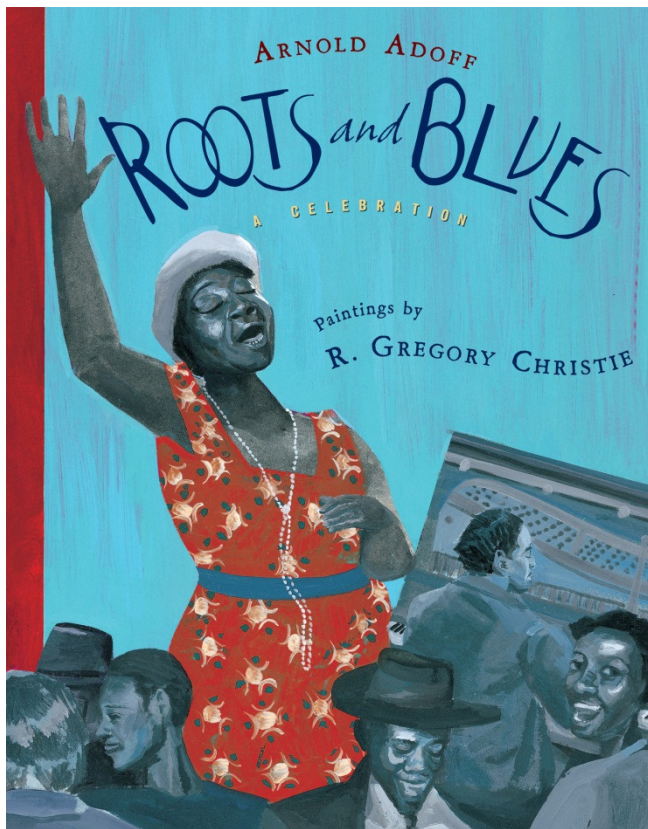


# Roots and Blues: A Celebration

by Arnold Adoff (author) and R. Gregory Christie (illustrator)  
A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit



## About the Book

Through poems and poetic prose pieces, acclaimed children's author Arnold Adoff celebrates that uniquely American form of music called the blues. In his signature "shaped speech" style, he creates a narrative of moments and joyous music, from the drums of the ancestors, the red dirt of the plantations, the current of the mighty Mississippi, and the shackles, blood, and tears of slavery. Each chop of the ax is a beat, each lash of the whip fashions another line on the musical staff. But each sound also creates the chords and harmonies that preserve the ancestors and their stories, and sustain life, faith, and hope into our own times.

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## Book Details

**Roots and Blues** by Arnold Adoff, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie.  
Clarion Books, 2011, ISBN 9780547235547. Ages 9 and up. NP Lexile.  
<http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/hmh/site/hmhbooks/kids>



## About the Author

Arnold Adoff was born and raised by Russian immigrant parents in New York City's South Bronx. He developed a love of reading and writing early in his childhood. Adoff received degrees in history and government from the City College of New York, and continued to live in New York for the next 12 years, studying at Columbia University and teaching social studies in Harlem and the Upper West Side. He met and married the celebrated children's author Virginia Hamilton during this time, and began work on an anthology of Black poetry, ***I am the Darker Brother: An Anthology of Modern Poems by Negro Americans***, which was published in 1968.

Adoff went on to publish several more anthologies as well as the groundbreaking children's book ***Black is Brown is Tan***, which featured the first interracial family in children's literature.

After moving to Yellow Springs, Ohio, with Hamilton and their children, Adoff shifted his career towards writing poetry and fiction for young people. His writing has garnered him many accolades, including the National Council of Teachers of English Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children (1988); American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults (1996; ***Slow Dance Heart Break Blues***); Blue Ribbon Award from the Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books (1997; ***Love Letters***); and Virginia Hamilton Literary Award (2004). He continues to live in Yellow Springs, where he writes unique and powerful works for young readers.

*Photograph courtesy of Houghton Mifflin Children's Book Group. Used with permission.*

### Author Resources:

#### Arnold Adoff's official website

<http://www.arnoldadoff.com/>

#### Author page on Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's website

<http://www.hmhbooks.com/hmh/site/hmhbooks/authordetails?authorName=Arnold%20Adoff>

#### Lines of Force: A Conversation with Arnold Adoff

[http://poetryadvocates.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/arnold\\_adoff\\_pacya1.pdf](http://poetryadvocates.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/arnold_adoff_pacya1.pdf)

### For publicity and speaking engagement inquiries:

Please contact the author at [arnoldadoff@hotmail.com](mailto:arnoldadoff@hotmail.com).

## About the Illustrator

R. Gregory Christie, who goes by Greg, is a prolific, award-winning illustrator. He has illustrated over twenty-five children's book to date. Three of his works have received the Coretta Scott King Honor Award for illustration: ***The Palm of My Heart: Poetry by African American Children*** (1997); ***Only Passing Through: The Story of Sojourner Truth*** (2001); and ***Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan*** (2006). He also received a Theodor Seuss Geisel Honor Award in 2008 for his picture book with author Lisa Wheeler, ***Jazz Baby***.

Christie studied fine arts at the School of Visual Arts in New York City and started his career by creating artwork for jazz albums. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.



*Photograph courtesy of Houghton Mifflin Children's Book Group. Used with permission.*

## Illustrator Resources:

### R. Gregory Christie's Official Website

<http://www.gas-art.com/>

### Publisher's page on Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's website

<http://www.hmhbooks.com/hmh/site/hmhbooks/authordetails?authorName=R.%20Gregory%20Christie>

### Seven Questions Over Breakfast with R. Gregory Christie

<http://blaine.org/sevenimpossiblethings/?p=1553>

### Artist R. Gregory Christie on Race, Identity, and Craft

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToXKblEaCnk>

## For publicity and speaking engagement inquiries:

Contact R. Gregory Christie through his website:

<http://www.gas-art.com/>

Speaking fees for schools and libraries are listed on the website.

## Talk About It!

Topics to share when discussing **Roots and Blues** with young readers.

- Many Africans who were taken from their homelands and forced into slavery sang songs from their past to retain their connection to their native cultures. Talk about how or why a song can evoke strong memories and/or feelings of unity. What songs remind you of your past, family, or an important time in your life?
- Adoff injects many elements of nature into his poems, such as rivers, mountains, soil, trees, rocks, and animals, to describe the music that would eventually evolve into what is known as "The Blues" and "R&B." Talk about the connection between music and nature. Does one inspire the other? What sort of images from nature would you use to describe your favorite genre of music or song?
- **Roots and Blues** explores the origins and emotions behind blues music. Talk with young readers about what the term "Blues" means to them. Does it describe the words of a song, the sound of a song, or the story behind the song? Does it describe all three? What other words would you use to talk about blues music?
- Blues music has given rise to some of the most well-known and well-respected musicians of the last century and contributed to the evolution of jazz and rock 'n roll. Talk about the stories behind the famous blues artists Adoff mentions in his poetry (such as Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson, "Ma" Rainey, and Big Joe Turner).
- Adoff highlights the places that were important to the birth and formation of blues music, such as the Mississippi River/Delta; Clarksdale and Itta Bena, MS; Greenville, SC; New Orleans, LA; Memphis, TN; Chicago, IL; Harlem; etc. Talk about the cultural history of one of these places, or discuss the places that have been important to the group in their own lives (states, towns, schools, etc.).

## Learn and have fun!

Here are some ideas for extending the experience of reading **Roots and Blues**.

- Have readers each create their own song using items such as spoons, boxes, sticks, empty containers, and even their hands, legs, and feet as in "Listening:" (p. 24).
- **Roots and Blues** is written entirely in poetry, specifically Adoff's unique "shaped speech" style. Explore different kinds of poetry with readers, from limericks and sonnets to free verse, ballads, and couplets. Have each write a poem, in the style of their choice, describing their favorite kind of music or song.
- Many of the famous blues artists mentioned in **Roots and Blues** have been inducted into The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland (<http://rockhall.com/>). Organize a trip to the museum where kids can learn more about the blues movement and artists like Robert Johnson, Big Joe Turner, Ma Rainey, and Muddy Waters.

- Listen to samples of blues music and discuss similarities and differences the students hear from song to song. Decide what makes a song “blues.” Is it the words? The instruments? The rhythm? The emotion? Form small groups and have each create its own “blues” song to perform for the class or group.
- Go on a “Blues Road Trip.” Assign each reader an area of the U.S. that was significant in the creation and/or evolution of blues: Memphis, New Orleans, Harlem, Mississippi, Chicago, etc. Locate each place on a map and research what these places were like during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when the blues were born (climate, population, culture, music scene, famous residents, etc.). Put it all together to create a cultural and geographical snapshot of the birthplace of blues.
- Using Biography Reference Bank, World Book, EBSCOhost, or other online resources available to students through INFOhio (<http://www.infohio.org/>) and to all Ohioans through Ohio Web Library (<http://www.ohioweblibrary.org/>), research blues figures, the history of blues music, and blues culture in America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Additional Activities and Ohio’s New Learning Standards

**Educators:** Every *Choose to Read Ohio* book for youth may be used to support Common Core Reading Standards. Here are examples of activities using **Roots and Blues** that align with additional content standards. These are examples. Other content standards may also apply.

**Librarians, parents, and others:** These activities may also be used in library programs, family activities, and other projects. Academic Content Standards define what students should know and be able to do at each grade. They are included for teachers who want to use this book in school. For more information, see the Ohio Department of Education website, <http://education.ohio.gov>. Click on “Academic Content Standards” in the Educators section.

### Science

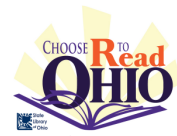
- *Physical Science – Light, Sound and Motion.* In collaboration with the extension activity in which you use household items to create music, explore the relationship between length and pitch. Using items like PVC tubing, fishing string, cardboard boxes, and wires, design two different musical instruments (one that uses blowing and one that uses plucking) that can create similar/identical notes. Instruct students to make patterns out of the sounds/notes to create songs. (Grade 5).
- *Life Science – Interconnections within Ecosystems.* All living things require energy and each living thing receives energy from its own sources in an exchange of energy that can be represented as a food web. Learn more about the Mississippi River – which appears often in the imagery of **Roots and Blues** – by having students research its ecosystem. What producers and consumers exist within this environment? What do the animals and organisms of the Mississippi River eat to survive? Have students create a food web demonstrating the ecosystem and its needs. (Grade 5).

## Social Studies

- *Geography – Places and Regions.* Encourage students to gain a stronger understanding of the region and culture that spawned the blues by researching the Deep South, Chicago, Harlem, etc. Have students pay special attention to cultural, economic, and population information from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, then compare what they find to more current data on the same region. How have these places changed? How would these/any changes impact the evolution of a phenomenon like the blues in today's world? Discuss the impact that culture, economy, and tradition can have on a place or region. (Grade 6).
- *History – Civil War and Reconstruction.* Delve deeper into the era of slavery in America that is present in much of **Roots and Blues** poetry and which informed the evolution of blues music. Divide the class into two halves; one will conduct research into the cultural and political issues that led to the American Civil War, while the other will research the Reconstruction period which saw many social changes and left lingering tension amongst the American people. Students in both groups should divide areas of research (social, political, economic, etc.) among themselves and present their information as a whole to the class via presentation software, poster board, short film, speeches, and/or their medium of choice. Focus on creating a before-and-after look at America during this era of turmoil and change. (Grade 8).

## English Language Arts

- *Reading: Literature – Craft and Structure (RL.6.4, RL.6.5).* Analyze how the use of figurative language and poem structure in **Roots and Blues** contributes to the book's overall theme of hope, history, and unity. Choose various poems from the book and discuss how Adoff's word choices, style, and structure convey the book's message or impacts the readers' perception (such as in "We Want To Think," p. 22; "Just Folks," p. 36; "The Kerosene Lamp..." p. 39; "Climbing to the Top of the Hill," p. 64; "Clapton and Stevie Ray..." p. 72). (Grade 6).
- *Writing – Text Types and Purposes (W.7.3).* Develop students' narrative skills by having them each write a short story from the perspective of someone who appears in **Roots and Blues**; a slave on the ship to America, a worker in the field, an enslaved mother caring for her child on a plantation, a young child growing up in slavery, an audience member at a blues club, or even a blues performer such as Robert Johnson or Ma Rainey. Students should develop their chosen character and the surrounding narrative based upon the emotions and details conveyed in Adoff's poetry as well as their own perceptions and ideas. Practice using sensory language and structured sequences of events to create a closer look at the many voices at the heart of **Roots and Blues**. (Grade 7).
- *Speaking and Listening – Comprehension and Collaboration (SL.4.1, SL.5.1, etc.).* Divide students into small groups and have each select a poem to analyze together. Each group will present its findings about word choices, styles and structures of their poem. (Grades 4-8).



<http://library.ohio.gov/ctro>

## Explore More!

*Additional ideas and resources to use with **Roots and Blues**.*

### Check It Out!

Go further into the world of blues with Walter Dean Myers and son Christopher Myers' picture book for older readers, **Blues Journey** (2007). With its poetic blues lyrics, enthralling artwork, and informative author's note, **Blues Journey** places readers directly in the heart of blues music, history, and emotion. Retrieve a copy from your local library: <http://www.oplin.org/content/find-a-library>.

### Kids Like Blues

<http://kidslikeblues.org/About.html>

Check out California teacher Jon Schwartz' innovative teaching program, "Kids Like Blues Band," which uses blues music and lyrics as a foundation for teaching reading, writing, listening skills, speech, social studies, and visual/performing arts. Watch videos of their performances and the program's success stories for a closer look at how this thematic teaching method works.

### Delta Blues Museum

<http://www.deltabluesmuseum.org/explore-learn.asp>

Explore the life and art of famous blues musicians like Muddy Waters and Son House through the website of the Official Delta Blues Museum (Clarksdale, Mississippi). Educators can register online to receive access to lesson plans (adaptable for various grades).

### American Civil War Museum of Ohio

Organize a field trip to the American Civil War Museum of Ohio in Tiffin (<http://www.acwmo.org/PlanningYourVisit.html>) to give young readers a stronger understanding of this important era in America's – and Blues' – history. Students will take a tour of the museum's artifacts and exhibits and can participate in numerous hands-on activities. There is also a video exploring "Ohio's Role in the Civil War."

Also locate other Civil War-related museums, historical sites, and events in Ohio through the **Ohio Historical Society** website (<http://www.ohiohistory.org/>) and the **Ohio Civil War 150** website (<http://www.ohiocivilwar150.org/>).

### About Choose to Read Ohio

Choose to Read Ohio, a project of the State Library of Ohio and the Ohioana Library Association, encourages public libraries, schools, families, and others to build a community of readers and an appreciation of Ohio authors and literature. CTRO is adaptable for use in classrooms, libraries, bookstores, by book discussion groups, families, and other community groups.

Explore Choose to Read Ohio resources & toolkits: <http://library.ohio.gov/ctro>.

This toolkit created September 2012.