

LIBBA

The Magnificent Musical Life of
ELIZABETH COTTEN

BY Laura Veirs

ILLUSTRATED BY Tatyana Fazlalizadeh

978-1-4521-4857-1 * \$17.99 HC

Ages 5 to 8 * F&P Text Level Gradient: Q

Lexile® Measure: TK



ABOUT THIS BOOK

Elizabeth Cotten was only a little girl when she picked up a guitar for the first time. It wasn't hers—it was her big brother's—and it wasn't strung right—she was left-handed. But she flipped that guitar upside down and backwards and taught herself how to play it anyway. By eleven, she'd written "Freight Train," one of the most famous folk songs. And by the end of her life, everyone from the California beaches to the rolling hills of England knew her music.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Picture books serve as valuable resources across grade levels. For older students, Kimberly Hill Campbell reminds us:

[Children's] literature is not just for struggling readers. This literature serves the needs of all adolescent readers...It is important to create a classroom where reading children's literature is presented as a genre study of literature. As Jamie Williams notes, children's books have the same elements as short stories, poetry, or nonfiction, but their accessibility "levels the playing field for students and also reconnects them with the excitement of story-time."¹

To promote excitement around story-time for students of all ages while teaching the elements of literature, this educator guide contains discussion questions and activities that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards, specifically the anchor standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

¹ Campbell, K.H. (2007). *Less Is More: Teaching Literature with Short Texts -- Grades 6-12*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

BEFORE READING (PRE-READING)

1. Introduce students to Elizabeth “Libba” Cotten. The “Works Cited” page of this biography lists relevant websites, videos, and other resources. In addition to what is provided here, you may find additional videos of Cotten on YouTube and on the website for the Library of Congress.
2. Distribute the lyrics of “Freight Train” to the students. Engage in a close reading of the text. Ask students to describe the images present in the song and to identify examples of figurative language in the lyrics.
3. Have students record the sounds (“the music”) in their communities like Cotten. What rhythms are present in their world?

DURING READING

1. Stop and view the first two illustrations, which are on the dedication page. One depicts Cotten’s four fingers gripping the arm of the guitar, and one portrays a young Cotten holding a guitar upright. Have your students discuss these two illustrations. Consider the use of the closer perspective and the use of blank space. These pages come prior to the title page. Ask students to discuss what they think these two images mean to the rest of the story.
2. The first line of the biography reads, “Libba Cotten heard music everywhere.” Later lines describe how she heard music at the river, when the ax dropped to chip wood, and when the trains passed. Have students explore the role music played in Cotten’s daily life. Discuss the ways in which music provided the markers for significant events in her life.
3. Point out the traditional prose paragraph and the italicized lines on page 13. Ask students to describe the ways these passages work together. Lead the class in a discussion about the word choice utilized in the italicized lines.
4. Cotten taught herself how to play the guitar “upside down” and “backwards” (pp. 12-13). Have students describe what her playing style says about her character.
5. When Cotten was a “tall and stately grandmother working in a department store” (pp. 24-25), she met Ruth Crawford Seeger. Lead students in a discussion about why this chance meeting was fortuitous for both women.
6. Ask students if they have ever heard of Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, or Muddy Waters. Listen to recordings from these artists. Have students discuss the type of music these artists played, and how their music might have influenced Cotten as an artist.
7. Notice the illustration on pages 28-29. Cotten is listening with her eyes closed to her surroundings, just as she did when she was a young girl (pp. 8-9). Have students discuss why these images of “listening” are significant.
8. When Cotten begins playing her guitar again, the “whole house was turned upside down and backwards” (pp. 32-33). Ask students to explain how this descriptive language is fitting to illuminate Cotten’s impact on folk music and the world.

AFTER READING

1. In his iconic poem “Harlem” Langston Hughes asks, “What happens to a dream deferred?”² Pair this poem with *Libba: The Magnificent Musical Life of Elizabeth Cotten*. Instruct students to consider how Cotten would answer this question. Have them discuss their answers and/or write them in a journal.
2. A powerful image of Cotten depicts her standing still and listening to the music in her surroundings. Other artists similarly listened closely to their surroundings to inform their work. Read the picture book biographies of Jimi Hendrix³ and Vasily Kandinsky.⁴ Have students discuss the ways these three artists merged their senses with sound, and how this process made their music extraordinary.
3. Invite the class to think about and describe the overall theme of Cotten’s biography. Instruct students to create visual representations of the theme and share the results with their peers for feedback.

² Hughes, L. (1994). *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. A. Rampersad (Ed.). New York: Vintage Books.

³ Golio, G. (2010). *Jimi: Sounds Like a Rainbow: A Story of the Young Jimi Hendrix*. New York: Clarion Books.

⁴ Rosenstock, B. (2015). *The Noisy Paint Box: The Colors and Sounds of Kandinsky’s Abstract Art*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publishers.

Common Core State Standards

Because literacy classrooms encourage reading, writing, speaking, and listening each day, the following applicable Common Core State Standards can be used to shape discussions and activities inspired by *Libba: The Magnificent Musical Life of Elizabeth Cotten*.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.5

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.3

Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.5

Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

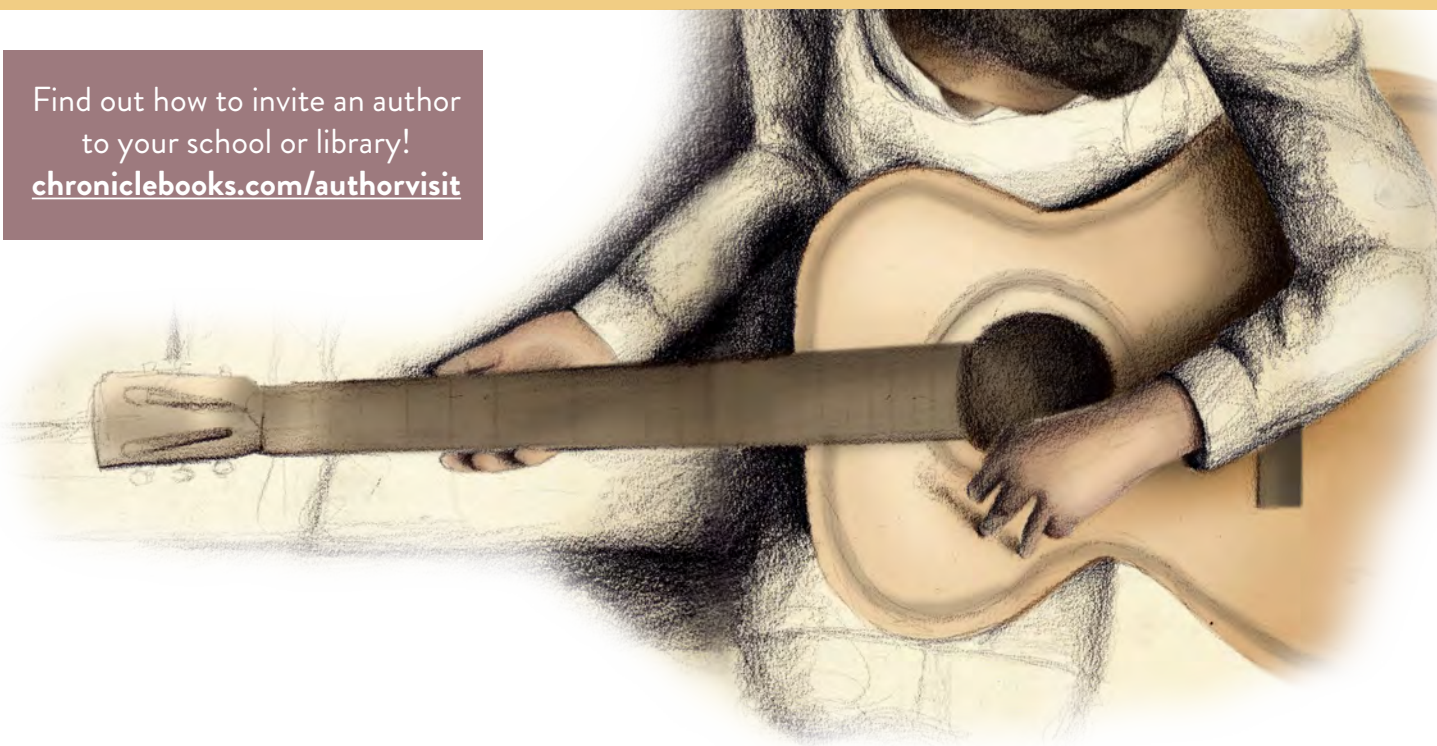
College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.1

Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

Find out how to invite an author to your school or library!
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Veirs is a singer-songwriter and longtime fan of Elizabeth Cotten. She lives in Portland, Oregon, with her husband and two sons. This is her first picture book.



ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Tatyana Fazlalizadeh is based in Brooklyn, New York, and is an artist, activist, and the creator of Stop Telling Women to Smile. This is her first picture book.