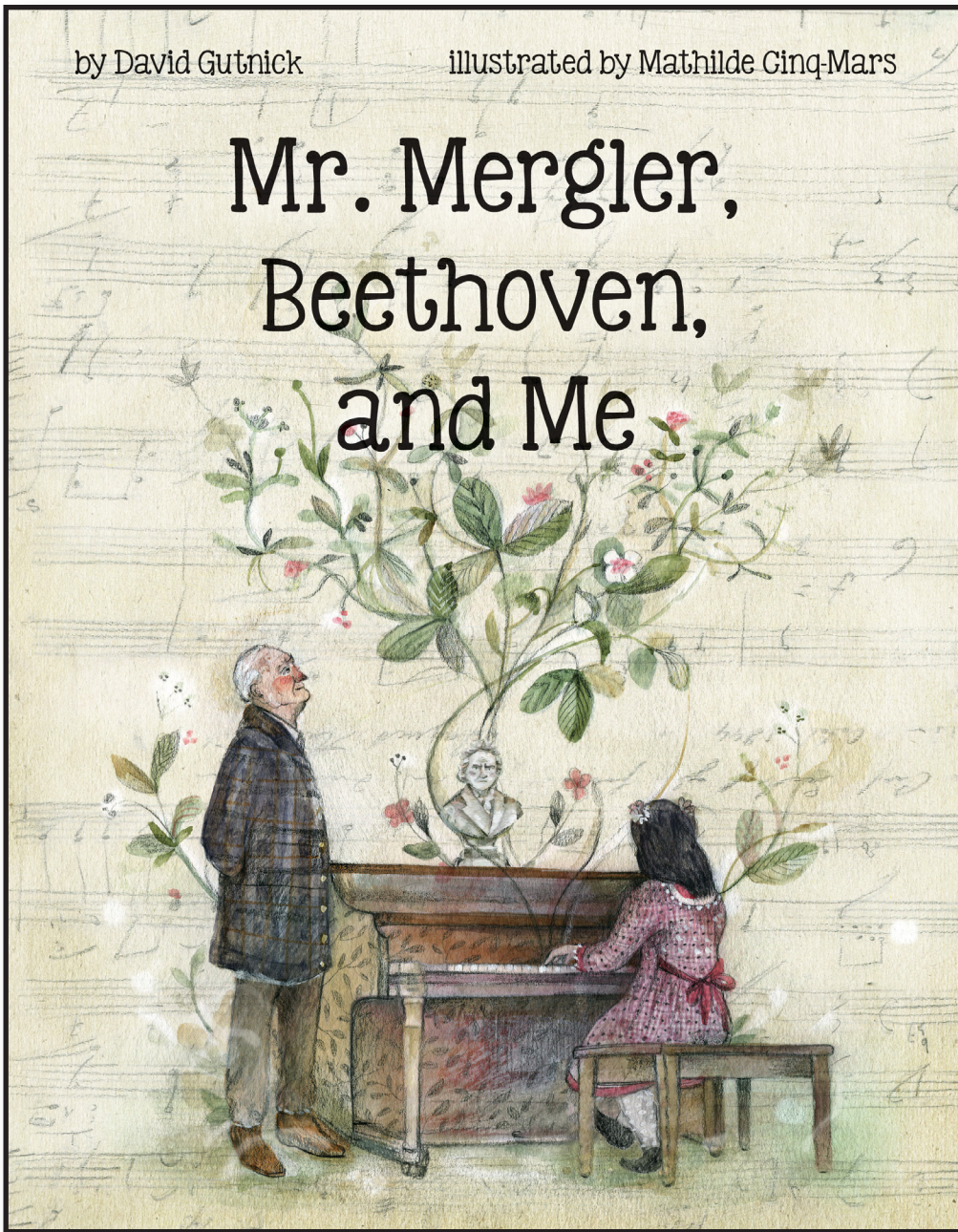


by David Gutnick

illustrated by Mathilde Cinq-Mars

Mr. Mergler, Beethoven, and Me



Grades 2-4; Ages 7-10

Teacher's Guide:
Mr. Mergler, Beethoven, and Me
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Synopsis:

This picture book is set in Montreal. It is about a little immigrant girl who meets a very exceptional music teacher, who sees her special ability, and offers her gratis piano lessons.

She becomes a member of his musical family, and has a warm relationship with him, until he can no longer teach due to illness. He dies, but not before finding her another skilled teacher to step in. His parting gift to her is a bust of Beethoven that he has always kept on his piano. The book was inspired by a true story and is 32 pages long. At the back, is a page about the real Mr. Mergler, and another about Beethoven.

Themes:

Music, Talent, Passion, Determination, Effort, Opportunity, Empathy, Friendship, Loss, and Multicultural & Intergenerational Relationships

Vocabulary:

Baba, Beamed, Studio, Cluttered, Sheet Music, Ivory Keys, Bust, and Composition

READING COMPREHENSION:

Main Idea and Retell:

What lessons did you learn from reading this story? Retell the order of events in this story. (**Teachers:** Cut up the sentence strips below, scramble them, and have your students re-arrange them to form the story line).

The child and her family arrive from China.

Baba introduces his 9-year-old daughter to Mr. Mergler.

The little girl sings for Mr. Mergler. Her voice makes him happy.

Mr. Mergler offers her free piano lessons.

Mr. Mergler writes a letter to his "star pupil" telling her that he is too sick to continue teaching her.

A new teacher takes over the lessons when Mr. Mergler stops teaching.

The girl continues to play piano, and cherishes the Beethoven Bust given to her by Mr. Mergler.

Reading Comrehension (continued)

Why do you think Mr. Mergler offered to teach the girl for free?

What did Mr. Mergler mean when he said, “Something tells me she understands the magic that music can bring to her life.”?

How did Mr. Mergler’s generosity & friendship change his student’s life?

How did she change his?

Why might Mr. Mergler have hidden his illness from the little girl?

Why was he so determined to find her a new piano teacher?

Visual Literacy: Analyzing Mathilde Cinq-Mars’ Illustrations:

The beautiful illustrations in this book have a melody of their own. They consist of musical notes woven into a garden of sound. It seems like flowers grow out of the piano whenever the child plays it. What might this represent?

There are a lot of different emotions throughout the story. How are these mirrored in Beethoven’s bust? We know that statues don’t actually change. Why might the illustrator have done this?

What significance does Beethoven have to this story?

WRITING CONNECTIONS:

Letter Writing:

Mr. Mergler wrote a letter to his “star pupil.”

- What was the purpose of his letter?
- What other reasons do we write letters to people?
- How does it feel to receive a letter?
- Why might he have sent a letter instead of an email or a phone call?
- Who might you want to write a letter to?
- What are the features of a letter?

★ Write a letter to a classmate, your teacher, your family member, or your principal.

Writing About Our Passions or Talents:

Mr. Mergler was very passionate about piano. He started playing when he was 6 years old. He received the bust of Beethoven at the age of 9 and kept it on his piano until he passed it on to his young pupil. He studied piano at Julliard (a very prestigious arts school in New York). Instead of becoming a famous concert pianist, he chose to teach piano and pass on his passion and talent to others.

- What is something you are really passionate about?
- What is one of your best talents?

★ Write about a passion or skill that you might be able to teach to your classmates.

★ Write up a procedure or set of instructions for them to follow to learn how to do something you are really good at.

★ Present your skills in a talent show—perhaps both the talent you already had, and the new skill you learned from a peer.

Writing About Important Relationships:

There are many important relationships in this story.

First, there is the parent-child relationship, where the girl's parents sacrificed everything to come to Canada to give her a better life, to buy her a piano when she showed an interest, and to commit time to taking her to lessons with Mr. Mergler every week.

- What sacrifices do you think your parents make for you?
- What time do they spend with you?
- What do they give you to keep you safe, and happy, and healthy?
- How do they help you achieve your goals?

★ Write a thank you letter to show your appreciation.

There is also the teacher-student relationship. Mr. Mergler sees something special in a 9 year old with perfect pitch and rhythm when she sings him a song in the park where they have met. He offers to give her lessons for free and to nurture her natural talent. The author beautifully captures the affection and bond between teacher and student—and the hundreds of students whose lives he's touched, by describing their photos on his wall.

- How does your teacher work hard to help you learn and grow?
- What are the best parts of your classroom and your school day?

★ Create a list of the things you are thankful for at school. Compare your list with a classmate to see if there is anything else you can add.

INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Teacher Note: At the heart of this story is a beautiful intergenerational relationship. Research on these relationships cite many benefits: Young participants learn new ways of looking at the world and come to more fully understand aging. Elder participants are energized and feel less isolated and lonely. For both, there is an opportunity to learn new skills, to feel a sense of purpose, and to keep family stories and history alive.

Another benefit of these relationships is to improve generational opinions. When people are raised in different time periods, their values and perceptions may differ, causing misunderstandings and negative impressions. The generation gap continues to widen due to our fast-paced, tech-rich, culturally diverse, globally connected society. It is, therefore, beneficial for young and old to learn more about each other and foster positive interactions.

Opportunities for connecting your students in a meaningful intergenerational relationship can range from small to large projects. (See below for some ideas).

Ask students:

- Think about the people in your life who are your friends. (Most friendships are between people of similar age groups – these are the people you most often have something in common with as you develop life experiences. The relationship between Mr. Mergler and his student is intergenerational – one that spans different generations.)
- What intergenerational relationships do you have? (grandparents, neighbours, tutors/instructors)
- What is so special about these relationships? What might you do together? What might you teach each other?
- What might each person gain? (see list above for possible benefits).

Ideas for building Intergenerational bonds:

- Invite a senior into your class (a war veteran to speak on Remembrance Day, or a grandparent to teach a cooking lesson, an art lesson, or a life-skill).
- Pair up with a local seniors residence that you might visit once a week or once a month. Learn about some of the elder companions; complete intergenerational art projects that tell life stories; play board games; read books. Older students might work toward publishing a book of senior life stories (interview seniors, write stories, vet their work with seniors, and compile a publication for sale to raise funds for something both generations can benefit from).
- If visiting a centre is not possible, try exchanging letters or emails between intergenerational pen pals.

MUSIC CONNECTIONS:

When the new pupil first arrives at Mr. Mergler’s studio and sees the room cluttered with books and sheet music, “It is as if all the notes in the world were waiting for someone to bring them to life.”

- What might the author have meant by these words?
- When do you listen to music? How does it feel to listen to music? What do you think about when you listen to one of your favourite songs?

Listen to a piece of classical music, such as the ones found in the link in the additional resources.

- What does it make you feel or think of?
- What type of beats, rhythms, and tempos make us feel happy, sad, angry, excited, calm, sleepy, etc.?
- Compose a tune to express an emotion. Can you guess the emotions that your peers are trying to convey in their compositions?
- If you don’t have a piano, use bells, kazoos, pots and pans – any tool will do to encourage rhythm and fun!

Listen to a remake of a song that is completely different from the original. How does the new sound affect the meaning of the song?

- Can you sing or play a song in a new way to express a different emotion? Can you write your composition in musical notes? How might learning about the meaning of a song (either by reading the words, or by researching the composer’s intent of an instrumental song) help you understand the work?
- Choose a song that speaks to you. What can you learn about its composer and its meaning? Present your findings to the class.
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RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES:

Learn more about Beethoven and other famous composers. What were their lives like? How did they first find their passions? What were some important relationships in their lives that helped them with their music? What challenges did they face?

- Create a multimodal poster to showcase your learning.
- Create an online scrapbook of your findings so you can add the music to your presentation.
- Dress up like your composer and give an oral report of your findings (in role).

Learn more about Mr. Daniel Mergler and Beethoven. What connections can you make to these real-life characters? Do you know anyone like them? Have you read about people like them in other books?

- Share your connections in a community circle.
- Write a journal entry about your thoughts.
- Create a list of interview questions you might ask Mr. Mergler or Beethoven if you could speak to them. See if your peers can answer some of your questions by role-playing in an Author's Chair.

**"The main thing is to always play from your heart.
Never just play notes—robots can do that—you must feel it."
—Mr. Mergler**

OCCASIONS TO USE THIS BOOK:

February – connections to love, relationships, and passions

March 29 – International Piano Day

June 21 – International Music Day

November 3 – World Kindness Day

December – Celebrating Beethoven's birth date (1770)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

For a selection of classical music along with accompanying music videos, check out: **10 Best Pieces of Classical Music for Kids**. The site below shares the title of the music, a brief description of its meaning, and a video of the composition being played. It is a great starting place for students to learn about different composers and research the messages behind their music.

- www.classicfm.com/discover-music/best-classical-music-for-kids/

TEXTS TO ENCOURAGE DEVELOPING INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS:

- *Roses for Gita* by Rachna Gilmore (Second Story Press): This is a story about a girl who recently emigrated from India, and like Mr. Mergler’s student, Gita finds an unlikely friendship with her elder neighbour (bonding over a love for gardening and music) that changes her life. Students might connect to the stereotypes presented in the beginning of the story, and the changes in perception that occur when you get to know someone. Reading this book might encourage students to get to know an elder person better.
 - <https://secondstorypress.ca/kids/roses-for-gita>
- *Stolen Words* by Melanie Florence (Second Story Press): This is a beautiful and heart-warming story of a granddaughter who is determined to help her grandfather, a residential school survivor, remember his lost Cree language. Aside from being an excellent book to introduce young students to the history of residential schools, this powerful intergenerational relationship embodies some of the benefits to both parties—love and compassion, wisdom and teaching, and optimism for the future brought by both young and old in different ways. Reading this book might encourage students to listen to other histories of the Elder friends they make.
 - <https://secondstorypress.ca/kids/stolen-words>
- *A Morning with Grandpa* by Sylvia Liu (Lee and Low): This is a story about Mei Mei and her grandfather, Gong Gong, who spend a morning in the park. Gong Gong is doing Tai Chi and tries to teach Mei Mei to slowly follow along. But Mei Mei has her own energetic flair to the movements, and soon tries to teach Gong Gong some of the yoga moves she is learning in school. Reading this book might encourage students to learn from and teach something of their own to an elderly friend, showing kindness, patience, and encouragement.
 - <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/a-morning-with-grandpa>