

The Stories and Art of Ezra Jack Keats: Arts Integration Lesson Plan



Image: Ezra Jack Keats, illustration for *The Snowy Day*, 1962. Ezra Jack Keats papers, de Grummond Children's Literature Collection, McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi. Copyright © Ezra Jack Keats Foundation.

About

Overview

This resource offers tools to integrate a visual art experience with your literacy curriculum. Through this K–2 geared lesson plan, elementary and art teachers will learn how to incorporate The CJM's award-winning [Stories and Art of Ezra Jack Keats](#) program into their classrooms.

Lesson Objectives

- To study the biography of Ezra Jack Keats, including his experience as a Jewish person.
- To integrate art making and observation into K–2 literacy curriculum
- To contribute to a culturally competent classroom where all students see themselves and their identities reflected in learning materials
- To provide students with tools to make personal connections to written and illustrated stories
- To offer students an open-ended, playful art process that centers personal agency and decision-making

Learning Materials

Vocabulary

Antisemitism – Treating someone differently, unequally, or meanly because they are Jewish. In school settings, this can take the form of bullying.

Author – A person who writes books.

Background – A part of the picture that depicts scenery to the rear or behind the main subject.

Collage – A picture made by layering pieces of paper onto a surface.

Discrimination – Treating a person or a group of people differently, unfairly, or worse than others.

Foreground – The elements or parts of an image that are closest to the front.

Illustrator – A person who draws pictures, especially in books or magazines.

Immigrant – A person who comes to a country from another country to permanently live there.

Jewish person – a person who identifies as Jewish based on their heritage, religion, or culture; many people who identify as Jewish are not religious and identify as Jewish because of their culture or heritage.

Scene – The place where an action or event occurs. In book illustrations, the scene can be identified with objects that indicate location, time, season, etc.

Video

The Life and Art of Ezra Jack Keats is a biographical video produced by The CJM. Explore Keats's experience growing up in the 1920s as the son of Jewish immigrants in New York City, how he used his urban surroundings as sources of inspiration, and his journey to becoming a beloved American children's author and illustrator.

To watch, visit: https://www.thecjm.org/learn_resources/877

Book***Dreams*****Written and Illustrated by Ezra Jack Keats**

A magical story about what happens after the neighborhood goes to bed, *Dreams* aligns with California K–2 literacy standards, including connecting text with illustrations and describing how characters respond to major events. This delightfully illustrated book also portrays friendship and various times of day.

Art Materials

Colorful paper (e.g. construction paper, cardstock, printer paper), patterned or textured paper, glue sticks, scissors; watercolor paper, watercolors, brushes, water cups, paper towels (optional, for watercolor component).

Activity

Author Study

Ezra Jack Keats was born in 1916 to Jewish immigrants from Poland in Brooklyn, New York.

Keats demonstrated artistic talent from a young age. As an adult, he wrote and illustrated many beloved children's books, including *The Snowy Day*. He died in 1983.

Ask students what they know about the word "Jewish." Jewish refers to a religion (called Judaism), a culture, and a heritage, which can be where your family came from, your family's culture or religion, or another important part of your family's background.

- a. Culture is when a group of people share values, traditions, foods, arts, language, etc. Jewish culture includes holidays like Hanukkah and Shabbat, foods like challah bread, and the Hebrew language in sacred books. Jewish culture also includes values such as good deeds (*mitzvot*) and giving charity (*tzedakah*).
 - i. Ask the students what are some of the special holidays, foods, and languages that connect them to their culture.
- b. Jewish diversity: There are Jewish people all over the world. While Jewish holidays are the same around the globe, there are many differences within Jewish culture, including different traditional foods, songs and melodies, and spoken languages, depending on where their families are from. Jewish people may also be Asian, Latinx, Black/African American, and more.

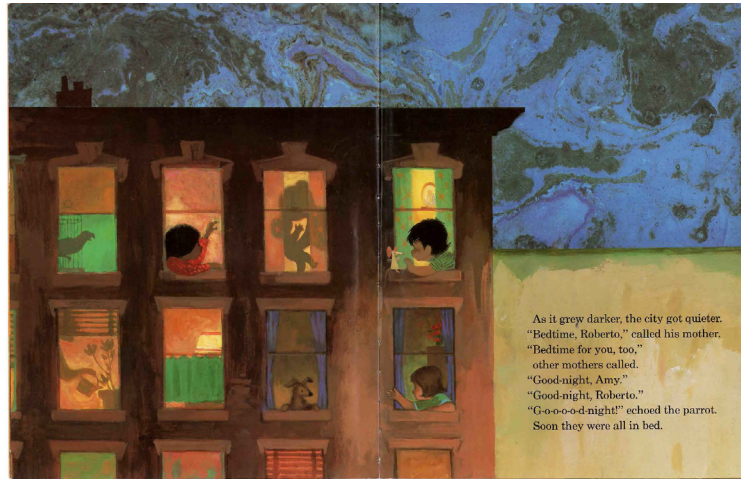
Watch [The CJM's video on Ezra Jack Keats](#). As your students watch this video, we recommend pausing at the following points to expand their understanding of key concepts.

1. **01:10 mark:** The video tells us that Ezra Jack Keats's parents were immigrants from Europe. Ben and Gussie Katz were born in Poland and moved to the United States to live.
 - a. Ask: what is an immigrant?
 - b. Invite students to share immigration stories from their own families or friendships.
2. **2:35 mark:** We learned that Ezra Jack Keats changed his name to sound less Jewish so he could more easily find a job. His name at birth was Jacob Ezra Katz.
 - a. Many groups of people have faced discrimination throughout history and even today, including Jewish people. At school, this could be bullying someone because they're different from you.
 - b. What questions do you have about why Ezra changed his name?

3. **4:26 mark:** Ezra Jack Keats's neighborhood, like your neighborhood, or our classroom, had children from many different backgrounds. What are some of the cultures we have in our classroom? Turn and talk to your neighbor and tell them about your culture. What holidays do they celebrate? Foods they eat? Languages they speak? Special ways of dressing, dancing, making art? Share out.
4. **5:45 mark:** Ezra Jack Keats made art in many different ways, such as drawing, painting, and collage. He even used a toothbrush! What are some of the ways you've made art? Tell your neighbor.
5. **End:** What was interesting to you in this video?
What is something that you learned?

Activity

Read Aloud and Close Looking



Ezra Jack Keats's books were often based on stories from his own childhood. Today, we are going to read a book that explores what happens when everyone is asleep, except for a child, cat, dog, and toy mouse!

Read *Dreams* aloud to the class

Project this illustration of Roberto and Amy's neighbors getting ready for bed. **See [Further Resources](#) for a larger version of this image.**

1. Share with students that Ezra Jack Keats used different techniques to create his illustrations, including collage, painting, drawing, and papermaking. The swirly sky is an example of marbled paper made by Ezra Jack Keats that he cut and pasted as the background of this illustration.
2. Use the following questions to help steer a class investigation of the illustration. As you go, and at the end of the discussion, paraphrase what students see.
 - a. What do you see?
 - b. What colors do you see? Where?
 - c. What do you think is happening in the apartment building? Is anyone doing something you also do before you go to sleep?
 - d. What time of day might it be? What do you see that makes you say that?
 - e. What do you think the children in the picture might be doing?
 - f. What other details do you see in the picture? What more can we find?
3. Ask students to imagine they are in the scene. What sounds do they hear? How does it feel to be here?

Activity

Pre-collage Brainstorm Exercises

Option A**Toy Adventure Story!**

1. Ask students to think of their favorite toy, stuffed animal, doll, or any object that they play with. Turn and talk in small groups and share.
 - a. Ask them to recall how Roberto's toy mouse went on an adventure to save the scared cat from the howling dog.
2. In preparation for making their collage, ask students to use the provided worksheet to brainstorm a toy adventure story. A prompt worksheet to help students get started can be found in Further Resources.

Option B**Class Walk: Exploring the Neighborhood Community!**

1. Ask students to recall Roberto's apartment building and all the many people that live in it. Share that, like your school and its students, Roberto's building and neighbors are all a part of a neighborhood community.
2. Go on a class walk to discover more about your school's neighborhood. On the walk, ask students to observe different aspects of the community.
 - a. Possible observation questions might include:
 - i. What places do you see in the neighborhood? Stores, parks, other schools, libraries, etc.?
 - ii. What people do you see? Mail carriers, caregivers, other children, shop workers?
 - iii. What animals do you see? Pets, birds, squirrels, insects?
 - iv. What sorts of transportation do you see? Cars, buses, bikes?
 - b. Students can also share the colors and shapes they notice.
3. Back in the classroom, discuss and reflect on the walk as a class. Keep track of student observations on the board.

Activity

Art Making

Prompt: Make a collage based on your toy adventure story OR class walk.

What is *collage*?

A picture made by layering pieces of paper onto a surface. Show an example from Ezra Jack Keats and/or another illustrator. See Further Resources for more collage illustrators and artists.

Making

1. Create the shapes for your collage:
 - a. Cut or tear the paper into shapes.
 - i. Your shapes can be precise, or you can create a variety of shapes to piece together on your background.
 - a. Toy Adventure: Have students look at their toy adventure worksheet. What details did they include about the toy's adventure? What shapes might help show what the toy saw and experienced, or who they met along the way?
 - b. Class Walk: Have students think about the places, people, animals, and kinds of transportation they saw on the walk. What shapes could they make to represent these different details?
 - ii. Show them how to combine different shapes to make an object in their picture.
2. Selecting colors for your collage:
 - a. You can select colors that are realistic (how things look in real life) or imagined (what colors you like or want to use).
 - b. Colors can also express emotion or mood in art.

Activity

Making a Watercolor Background (Optional)

Materials

Watercolor paper, watercolor set, brushes, water cups, water, paper towels

1. Demonstrate how to use watercolors:
 - a. Dip brush into water, swirl on color to pick up paint, and apply to paper.
 - More water = thinner wash
 - Less water = thicker wash
2. To mix colors, use the plastic top of the watercolor container to combine colors. Always dip the brush into water to clean it before picking up a new color.
3. Painting the background:
 - a. Students can apply color to the paper however they choose to make their background.
 - b. Some ideas for backgrounds include painting: one solid color, a rainbow, an abstract composition, polka dots, an assortment of shapes, a landscape, or city streets.
4. Drying: Once the students have completed their watercolors, let them dry for about 15–30 minutes.

Resource

Further Resources

Recommended Books

The Adventures of Beekle: The Unimaginary Friend, written and illustrated by Dan Santat

Chik Chak Shabbat, written by Mara Rockliff, illustrated by Krysten Brooker

Everyone in the Red Brick Building, written by Anne Wynter, illustrated by Oge Mora

Hey, Wall: A Story of Art and Community, written by Susan Verde, illustrated by John Parra

Last Stop on Market Street, written by Matt de la Peña, illustrated by Christian Robinson

Ray, written and illustrated by Marianna Coppo

Sarah's Room, written by Doris Orgel, illustrated by Maurice Sendak

Explore themes of community and working in collage with these contemporary artists:

Deborah Roberts (American, b. 1962)

- a. Explores Blackness, childhood, and constructed identity. Utilizes collage and drawing.
- b. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MuhlImD6mtg>

Jordan Casteel (American, b. 1989)

- a. Explores community, Blackness, identity, and family. Primarily a painter.
- b. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I1_Li6sgA6k

Marianna T Olague (American, b. 1990)

- a. Explores Mexican American identity, border communities, family, and community.
- b. <https://www.mariannaolague.com/about-avenue>

Song Dong (Chinese, b. 1966) & Yin Xiuzhen (Chinese, b. 1963)

- a. Both artists explore themes such as urban landscapes, memory, change, and cultural identity. Song and Yin are married.
- b. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pX7DoQuOWng>

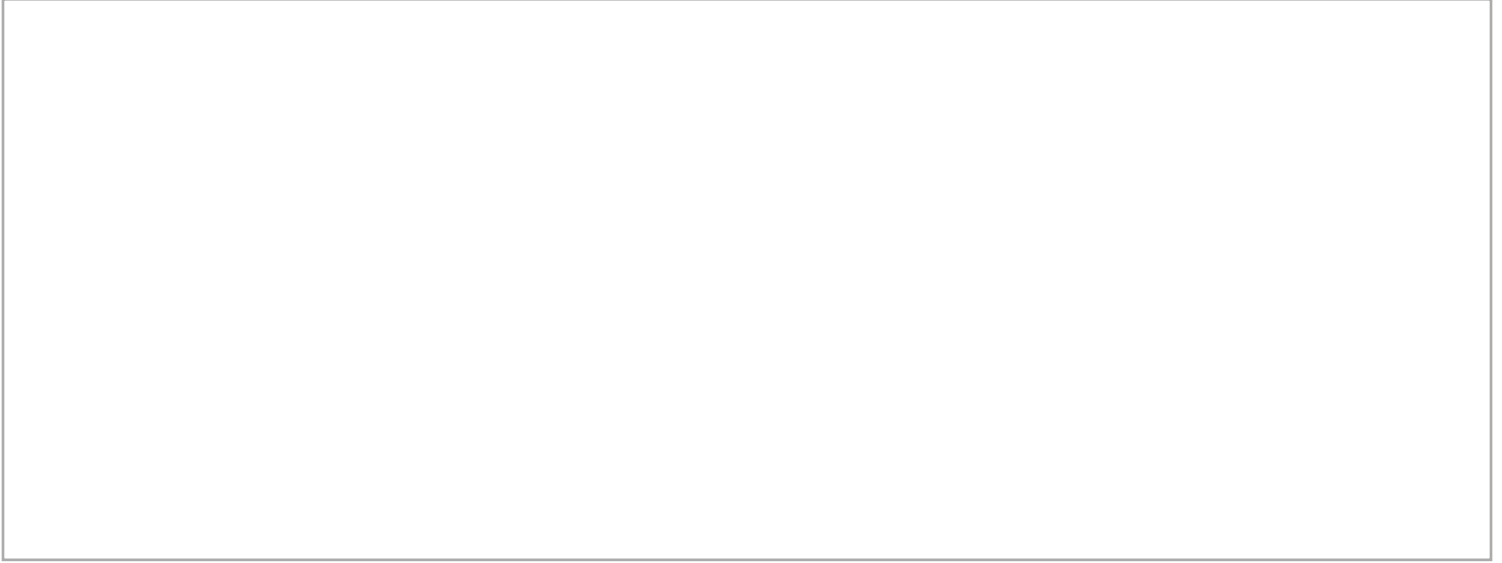
William Kentridge (South African, b. 1955)

- a. Explores history, social injustice, and multimedia art making. Utilizes collage, animation, drawing, printmaking, and more.
- b. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYjMpNxvreo>

Resource

Toy Adventure Worksheet

Draw your favorite toy in the box below.



Write your answers in the spaces below the questions.

1. The big adventure begins! Your toy can go anywhere you can imagine. Where will it go?
2. Your toy will need transportation! What will it ride to get around?
3. On their big adventure, what do you think your toy will see?
4. On their big adventure, who do you think your toy will meet?
5. When your toy comes home, it tells you all about its adventure. What does it say about the trip?

