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John Coltrane's Giant Steps (Richard Jackson Books (Atheneum Hardcover))



Synopsis

You may be surprised at the tricky music a box, a snowflake, some raindrops, and a kitten can make. Right before your eyes. And on the pages of this book. There is someone backstage watching, encouraging our performers but keeping them under control. Why not listen along?

Book Information

Series: Richard Jackson Books (Atheneum Hardcover)

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Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (13 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #481,098 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #18 inÂ Books > Children's Books > Arts, Music & Photography > Music > Jazz #1227 inÂ Books > Children's Books > Arts, Music & Photography > Performing Arts #1347 inÂ Books > Children's Books > Early Learning > Beginner Readers

Age Range: 4 - 7 years

Grade Level: Preschool - 2

Customer Reviews

Chris Raschka is one of our most ambitious children's book illustrators. When he's good, he's great, and he wins the Caldecott Award for best children's illustration. When he tries too hard, he's sly but opaque, clever but obscure. "Waffle," for example, plays with concept at the expense of clarity, and the result is a disappointing mish-mosh. This book is on the heady side, but musically-inclined youngsters guided by a talented teacher, parent, or other adult will enjoy's Raschka's imaginative deconstruction/reconstruction of Coltrane's magnificent jazz piece. Raschka almost nails it with this visual and verbal description of saxophonist John Coltrane's incredible "Giant Steps," a landmark number of dizzying complexity, speed, and joy that most energetic youngsters would like on its own. However, much of the appeal lies in a very intellectual exercise requiring levels of abstract thinking and reading ability beyond most of the young audience who will be attracted to the picture book format. However, teenagers, pre-adolescents with a musical bent, and adults will appreciate

Raschka sensitive evaluation of Coltrane's talent. Younger kids might like the colorful (although not vividly colorful) pictures, and the pictures of the raindrops, snowflake, and cat. However, these by themselves are not that appealing, and the song's "narration" is clever but not a very interesting story. That is why the book doesn't quite work for early elementary school-age kids reading it on their own. The most fascinating aspect of Raschka's "Giant Steps" is that he purposely draws the song all wrong! The book disappoints, and then tricks us, because Raschka knows exactly what he was doing.

When you review a picture book you have a responsibility to two kinds of consumers: The parents who buy the books and the children who read them. Now when I was a kid you probably could've handed me junky handwritten papers illustrated in crayon and I would've loved them. Children know what they do and do not like and it is the responsibility of their parents to choose well-written worthwhile books that will stand the test of time for their youngsters' brains. However, at the same time you don't want to be the kind of parent who only gets books for your kids that are "good" for them. I see these kinds of adults all the time. Unfortunate children are dragged to my library and forced to read books like "Gulliver's Travels" and "Treasure Island" which, while good, aren't the kinds of books that reluctant readers are instantly going to gravitate towards. The same goes for picture books. Sometimes I'll recommend a picture book that children may initially find dull or confusing simply because it's either a work of art or so well-written that I'm sure the children will grow to love it. Which brings me, in a definitely roundabout way, to "John Coltrane's Giant Steps". This is a book that undoubtedly seemed like a good idea when it was thought up. I mean, what could be cooler? You take a John Coltrane song and then using artist Chris Raschka's remarkable watercolor and inks show the song as a visual piece of work. The idea is sublime. The result is deathly dull and confusing for kids. If you are not familiar with "Giant Steps" the song, you may wish to listen to it as you read this book. The book begins with the words, "Good evening. And thank you for coming to our book. We have something very special for you tonight.

"Good evening. And thank you for coming to our book. We have something very special for you tonight. It's John Coltrane's marvelous and tricky composition, "Giant Steps," performed for you by a box, a snowflake, some raindrops, and a kitten..." So begins the conductor's introduction to Chris Raschka's brilliant visual jazz rendition of Giant Steps. First he explains a little about who John Coltrane is, and how his music was composed, "...[he] wrote music which, in his hands, became swirling, leaping, tumbling "sheets of sound." That's what he called it. But why tell you when we can

show you?" Then the composition begins with the raindrops, the tempo, "not too fast and not too slow." Next he layers the box, the base, "...the bottom. It's something to build on." Here comes the snowflake, the piano, "showing us the harmony, the beautiful frame." And last, the kitten, the melody, "watch her take some giant steps across the page." As Mr Raschka "conducts", problems begin to occur, the shapes and colors collapse, and he finally yells STOP! "People, people! What happened? Okay, okay, let's take a look at some trouble spots." After detailing when, where and how each shape went wrong, and giving constructive directions, the composition begins again. "Let's take it from page 14. Raindrop, box, snowflake, kitten. GO. Sheets of color. Sheets of sound. Bravo. Bravo, everyone." Mr Raschka's entertaining text, written in an engaging, conversational style, is informative and enlightening. His layering of shapes and colors provides a clever and creative visual understanding of jazz and John Coltrane's "sheets of sound."

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