

## MR. WILLIAMS

### Louisiana Young Readers' Choice Award Nominee 2008 Grades 3-5

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**Mr. Williams** by Karen Barbour. Henry Holt and Company, 2005. 32 pages.

#### Summary

*Mr. Williams* is the story of the early experiences of an African American man born in 1929 in Arcadia, Louisiana. It is told in the voice of Mr. J. W. Williams, who grew up in a large farm family in North Louisiana during the Depression. Their house had no electricity and no running water. Everyone in the family had to work very hard, but there was time for swimming, fishing, church and the high point of the year – Christmas. In a gentle, matter-of-fact tone, he speaks about the love among family members and the prejudice that they endured, such as the time a white boy tried to run him off the road with a car. It is a meaningful, enlightening story about the harsh realities and the joys of Mr. Williams' life. Barbour's folk art collage illustrations complement the down-to-earth tone of the narrative.

#### Author's Biography

Karen Barbour is the author and illustrator of several children's books and has illustrated books for many noted authors, such as Jane Yolen and Eve Bunting. She illustrated *Marvelous Math: A Book of Poems* selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins, which was a Parents' Choice Gold Award winner and a Reading Rainbow selection. She lives in Point Reyes Station, California. Barbour was a family friend of Mr. Williams, and just prior to his death in 2000, she asked him to share his memories with her.

[http://www.harpercollins.com/authors/11771/Karen\\_Barbour/index.aspx](http://www.harpercollins.com/authors/11771/Karen_Barbour/index.aspx)

[http://www.harperchildrens.com/teacher/catalog/author\\_xml.asp?authorID=11771](http://www.harperchildrens.com/teacher/catalog/author_xml.asp?authorID=11771)

#### Other Titles Written by Karen Barbour

*Mr. Bow Tie*

*Nancy*

*Little Nino's Pizzeria*

#### Other Titles Illustrated by Karen Barbour

*Fire! Fire! Hurry! Hurry!* by Andrea Zimmerman and David Clemesha.

*I Have an Olive Tree* by Eve Bunting.

*Let's Talk About Race* by Julius Lester.

*Marvelous Math: A Book of Poems* selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins.

*A Sip of Aesop* by Jane Yolen.

*Street Music: City Poems* by Arnold Adoff.

#### Related Titles

*Freedom Summer* by Deborah Wiles.

*Grandpa's Face* by Eloise Greenfield. Illustrated by Floyd Cooper.

*Leon's Story* by Leon Walter Tillage.

*My Brother Martin: A Sister Remembers* by Christine King Farris.

*Talking with Tebe: Clementine Hunter, Memory Artist* by Mary E. Lyons.

*The Whispering Cloth* by Pegi Dietz Shea.

*Working Cotton* by Sherley Ann Williams. Illustrated by Carole Byard.  
*Creating Freedom: Material Culture and African American Identity at Oakley Plantation, 1840 – 1950* by Laurie A. Wilkie.

### **On the LYRC Ballot**

*The School is Not White* by Doreen Rapaport.  
*Show Way* by Jacqueline Woodson.

### **Classroom Connections**

#### **Language**

- Use this book as an introduction to a unit on African American biographies. Have students research the life of an African American and present important facts about that person. This website has a large list of African American biographies for children and teens: [http://www.ability.org.uk/kids\\_and\\_teens\\_biography\\_african.htm](http://www.ability.org.uk/kids_and_teens_biography_african.htm)
- Have students write an acrostic poem using the title of the book to describe Mr. Williams.
- Read two other books on this year's LYRC ballot that are about African American families in different time periods: *The School is Not White* by Doreen Rapaport and *Show Way* by Jacqueline Woodson. Have the students compare and contrast the 3 books: setting, characters, writing style, illustrations, experiences of characters, etc.

#### **Art**

- Barbour uses a primitive style painting, which is similar to that of Clementine Hunter, a self-taught artist who lived on Melrose Plantation in Natchitoches, Louisiana. Examples of Hunter's artwork can be found at the Gumbo Island website <http://www.lpb.org/education/classroom/itv/gumbo/> or from *Talking with Tebe*, a biography by Mary Lyons. Compare the two artists' styles. Barbour uses pieces of fabric in her collages.
- Have children paint a scene in a similar style and use fabric or colorful paper to enhance the painting.

#### **Science**

- Mr. Williams mentioned that his family grew the following crops: cotton, corn, peanuts, peas, potatoes, watermelon, cantaloupe, muskmelons, sugarcane, sweet potatoes, and oats. Have each student research one of these crops, including where and how they are produced and how they are harvested. If possible, actually grow one of them.
- Have the students examine examples of sugarcane or cotton. The Parish Cooperative Extension Offices can assist with locating samples. [http://www.lsuagcenter.com/en/our\\_offices/parishes/](http://www.lsuagcenter.com/en/our_offices/parishes/)

#### **Oral History**

- *Mr. Williams* is Karen Barbour's recollection of a family friend's life story. Have students conduct an interview with a friend or relative, write, and illustrate their story. Use questions suggested by this book, such as:
  - Who was president when you were born?
  - What was your house like?
  - Did you have special chores?
- <http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/oralhist/> Virginia's oral history site with photographs.

- <http://www.louisianafolklife.org/> Information and various lesson plans related to Louisiana folklife and oral histories.

### **Geography**

- Mr. Williams was born in Arcadia, Louisiana. Find Arcadia on a map of Louisiana. Visit the web site for Arcadia <http://www.arcadialouisiana.org/> to answer questions, such as:
  - What is Arcadia noted for?
  - Where is its sister city?
  - What is the population?
  - What crops are grown there?
- Find the longitude and latitude of Arcadia, Louisiana and Arcadia, Florida and determine the distance between the twin cities.
- Using outline maps of Louisiana, have students label the parishes in Louisiana and locate the town of Arcadia. Assign a parish to each student for research to find important facts about each parish. [http://www.classbrain.com/artstate/publish/article\\_124.shtml](http://www.classbrain.com/artstate/publish/article_124.shtml)
- After students have read this book, read aloud *Leon's Story*, which takes place in North Carolina, and compare the two stories.

### **Web Sites**

#### **Black History**

[http://www.atozteacherstuff.com/Themes/Black\\_History/index.shtml](http://www.atozteacherstuff.com/Themes/Black_History/index.shtml)

This website contains lesson plans concerning African American history and African American topics.

#### **Education in Louisiana – Just For Students**

<http://www.louisiana.gov/wps/wcm/connect/Louisiana.gov/Education+in+Louisiana/Just+for+Students/>

This website is the Louisiana Social Studies home page. This website contains resources for the subject area of Social Studies with a focus on Louisiana.