



## Classroom Guide for JOSHUA'S MASAI MASK

by Dakari Hru  
illustrated by Anna Rich

### Reading Level

Interest Level: Grades 1-4

Reading Level: Grade 3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.4/.5

Lexile Measure®: 580

Scholastic Reading Counts!™: 4.5

### Themes

Self-image, Competition, African Traditions, Role Models

### Synopsis

Joshua loves playing his kalimba, a traditional African musical instrument. But when his family suggests he join the school talent show, he thinks it's a terrible idea; all his classmates like rap. Wishing to be popular, Joshua turns to his Uncle Zambezi, who gives him a magical Masai mask. Little does he know, the mask will grant Joshua his wish, and more...

*Joshua's Masai Mask* is a positive tale in which a young boy learns what it's like to be in someone else's shoes.

### Background

Numbering over 240,000 people, the Masai live in Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa. They are a pastoral and semi-pastoral people.

The mask is an ornament an adult warrior wears when he goes to war. It is made of ostrich feathers tied onto a wooden frame. It is first worn when a Masai boy reaches the age of twelve to fifteen, as he participates in the rituals and ceremonies that initiate him into adulthood. During this period, he hunts for ostriches and birds, and wears the headdress as a symbol that he is a young warrior.

The kalimba that Joshua plays is a musical instrument used in certain regions of Africa such as Zambia, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe. It has a number of keys, usually made of metal or reed, fastened over a bridge to a hardwood sound board. The sound board is held with both hands and the keys are plucked with the thumbs and sometimes with the index fingers.

Like drums, the kalimba is used in religious ceremonies by priests, healers, diviners, and rainmakers. It is also played at times of initiation, circumcision, childbirth and for pure entertainment.

## **BEFORE READING**

### **Prereading Focus Questions**

Before students read the story, you might want them to discuss one of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. What are some special skills or talents that you have. Do you like to share them? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever wanted to be someone else? If so, who have you wanted to be and why?
3. Do you think it is important to be popular or "cool"? Why? What does it mean to be "cool?" Who do you think is "cool?"
4. How do you feel when you think about getting in front of a big crowd? Why?

### **Vocabulary**

Have students work in pairs to find interesting or unfamiliar words in the text. Some examples are dashiki, kalimba, Masai mask. Suggest that students write these words on the chalkboard. Then discuss the meaning of each word with the class.

### **Setting a Purpose for Reading**

Have students examine the cover and the first few pages of *Joshua's Masai Mask*. Ask students to consider what the book might be about. Tell students to think of any questions they might have about the boy on the cover. What is he holding? Ask if they predict this object will be important in the story.

## **AFTER READING**

### **Discussion Questions**

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation. Encourage students to refer to back to verses and illustrations in the book to support their responses.

1. What was the problem that Joshua faced and what were the reasons that Joshua wanted to be other people?
2. The Masai mask turned Joshua into Kareem for a while. What was Kareem's family life like? Would you want to be in Kareem's place? Why did Joshua decide to change into someone else?
3. The Masai mask also turned Joshua into the Righteous Rapper for a while. Do you think it would be exciting to be Righteous Rapper? Why did Joshua decide to again change into another person?

4. Discuss the role of a mayor. What are some of this person's responsibilities? What's the best thing about being a mayor? What's the worst thing about it? What influenced Joshua's decision to change from being the mayor?
5. With which person was Joshua finally satisfied being? Why?
6. Discuss the illustrations with the students, particularly the pictures of the kalimba, the Masai mask, and Joshua's dashiki. Use the discussion of the illustrations to elicit the idea that most cultures have special ways of celebrating, of dressing, and of making music. If it is a multiethnic classroom, ask students if they know of any traditional instruments or costumes from their culture.

### **Reader's Response Journals**

Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to what they have read. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, oral discussion, or drawings.

1. Would you like to be a performer? What would you like to perform?
2. Would you ever want to have a mask like Joshua's? Why or why not? Have you ever wished you were someone else?
3. Do you remember a time when you were supposed to do something that you really did not want to do? (Some examples may be cleaning your room, sharing toys, going to the doctor). What did you do about it?
4. Joshua had so many fears about playing in the talent show but it did not turn out to be so terrible after all. Have you had a similar experience of fearing something terrible was going to happen but it didn't? Write about it.

### **ESL Teaching Strategies**

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. You might first have the students look at the pictures of the story only and discuss what the story could be about. Have them identify the main character and follow that character and his changes throughout the story. Encourage students to use their imaginations.
2. You might wish to have students who speak English as a second language read the story to each other. Encourage each pair of students to read alternate paragraphs to each other. Tell them to discuss with one another any parts of the story they do not understand.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES**

In order to integrate students' reading experiences with other subject areas, you might want to have students complete some of these activities.

**Social Studies**

1. On the board, write the following topics: dashiki, kalimba, Masai mask. (More topics can be generated by the class.) Divide the class into small groups. Ask each group to find out as much information about each topic as possible before sharing that information with the rest of the class. Some questions to consider are: How is this object made? How is it used? Who uses it and where do they live? When is it used?
2. After students have finished reading the book, divide them into groups of four. Tell students that they will work together to make a map of Africa. This Team Product activity will require each student to contribute part of the product. Give each group a large outline map of Africa, divided into four sections. You might simply want to quarter the map. On the other hand, you might want to divide the continent into regions according to climate and topography.

Tell students that they are to select a section of the map. Explain that they will do research using an encyclopedia or other reference books to find out what countries, physical features, natural resources, and peoples exist in the section of Africa that they have chosen. When they have enough information, they are to draw the boundaries of the countries of the map. Tell students to include the names of the countries, as well as important geographic features such as major rivers and mountains. In each country, they are to draw a small box that names the groups of people in the country (e.g., Ibo, Watutsi, Masai).

Suggest that students decorate their maps with drawing of African artifacts (such as the Masai mask). Tell students to be sure that they draw the artifacts on the area of the map from which they come.

3. Magic is a feature of many African folk tales. Have students read some African folk tales and retell the tales to the class. You might want to discuss the fact that the folk tales are often similar to folk tales from other parts of the world.
4. Dedicate a bulletin board or class time to reviewing newspaper articles and newfound facts pertaining to African current events (or its history).

**Science**

1. Masai masks are trimmed with ostrich feathers. Let the class learn about ostriches i.e. what kind of animals they are, where they live, what they eat, what they look like, etc. (This lesson can branch into learning more about animals in Africa in general, or into learning more about different kinds of birds.)
2. Have students find out what animals are native to Africa. Suggest students to find out if any of them are considered endangered species.
3. Discuss how sound, and therefore music, is produced and received. Investigate air waves and its many facets, such as through what medium sound travels fastest? slowest? How is sound produced through instruments? Also, students can study the ear and how it receives sound.

**Music**

1. If it is available, offer recordings of African music, especially the kalimba. Provide the class with pictures of and information on different kinds of African instruments, and tell them what part of Africa the instruments come from.
2. Explore different music forms e.g., traditional, rap, classical. Listen to examples of each. Give students examples of how contemporary music incorporates different forms of music.

**Art**

1. Supply students with different types of materials e.g., egg cartons, beads, sandpaper. With these materials, let students make their own instruments.
2. Explore different masks from different cultures and discuss the purposes that different ceremonial masks held. Then ask students to make a mask.
3. Kente (KEN-tay) cloth is hand-woven in narrow strips of material by African craftsperson. Different colors and patterns have different meaning. Show students samples of kente cloth in reference books. Tell them to draw a picture of a piece of kente cloth and write an explanation of what the cloth represents.
4. Tell students to look in reference books or a book about Africa for examples of dashikis. Then have them design their own dashikis. Tell them to draw their dashikis and color them with crayons, watercolor, or tempura paints.

**Drama**

Supply students with different types of materials e.g., egg cartons, beads, sandpaper. With these materials, let students make their own instruments.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Dakari Hru** (1952-1994) was a poet and storyteller who counted children of all ages and backgrounds as part of his large extended audience. He was born in Pittsburgh, PA, and received a bachelor's degree in French from the University of Dayton in Ohio and a master's degree in organizational psychology from Columbia University.

When it came to writing, Dakari Hru had said that "inspiration jumps out at him from everywhere." It was the sheer beauty of the mask that inspired him to write *Joshua's Masai Mask*. The fact that he studied and admired Masai culture further drew him into the story.

**ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR**

**Anna Rich** has illustrated numerous picture books, including *Saturday At The New You*, named among the Best Children's Books of 1994 by the Bank Street College Children's Book Committee. She has wanted to be an illustrator since she was in high school. Rich attended the Rhode Island School of Design. *Joshua's Masai Mask* is her first picture book.

**Awards & Reviews**

"Pick of the Lists," *American Bookseller*

"Choices," Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)

"Its message is splendidly universal. Gently, without didacticism, it urges us to make the best of our talents, in ways that should engage any American child." –*The New York Times*

"A story centering on real children with real feelings..fying read for children of any color, this book will easily come alive at story hours as well as in the hands of individual readers." –*Publishers Weekly*

"Hru and Rich weave an accomplished story of sensitivity and self-actualization. Illustrations are rich in color and capture the essence of love, encouragement, anxiety, and self-assurance... A picture book to be enjoyed by a wide audience." –*School Library Journal*

**Resources on the Web**

Learn more about *Joshua's Masai Mask* at:

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/73/pb/joshua\\_s\\_masai\\_mask](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/73/pb/joshua_s_masai_mask)

**Also illustrated by Anna Rich**

*Saturday at the New You*

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/102/pb/saturday\\_at\\_the\\_new\\_you](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/102/pb/saturday_at_the_new_you)

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**Book Information**

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