

A Silent Witness in Harlem by Eve Creary is a mystery set during the Harlem Renaissance. When the story begins it is 1988 and a young girl named Felicia and her grandmother are packing their belongings to move out of Harlem. Felicia discovers a newspaper clipping about a kidnapping 60 years earlier and convinces her grandmother to tell her all about it. So the story within a story begins: twelve-year-old Lily worked in the library where famous writers including Zora Neale Hurston gave readings. Lily became suspicious of the librarian, Miss Washington, when she saw her accepting an envelope full of cash. Miss Washington had been sharing a manuscript with Lily that surprised her too. How did Miss Washington know about rent parties, nightclubs, bootlegging, and gambling? Later, Lily thought she saw Miss Washington at a rent party that she and her friend Anna sneaked into in the middle of the night. And then, as Lily sat on the stoop at 3 a.m. waiting to leave the party, she witnessed four white men surround a black man and shove him into a waiting car with a woman in the back seat who looked like Miss Washington! Lily only told her two friends about what she had seen, but the following Sunday, the headlines of *The New York Times* read “Rich Negro seized for \$50,000 Ransom.” Lily found out she was being followed by an undercover policeman for her own safety. In the end, Lily learned a hard lesson about race and justice when the kidnapped man, Casper Holstein, asked her to pretend she never saw the kidnapping. Miss Washington, it turned out, was a friend of Casper Holstein’s, and honest yet adventurous. Felicia’s grandmother, it turns out, is the young Lily!

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Before reading ***A Silent Witness in Harlem***, discuss with your class what they already know about the Harlem Renaissance. After sharing responses, read the title and tell them most of the story takes place in 1928, in Harlem New York.

Some questions for discussion might be:

- If this story takes place in 1928, what else was happening in America around the same time? Where does it fit in chronologically with other events already studied? Who was president? What laws were passed around this time, particularly laws affecting African Americans?
- Look at the cover illustration. What do students notice in the picture? Who might be the “silent witness”? What might this person have seen?
- Look at the map on the inside cover of the book. Look at a more detailed map of Manhattan and outline the area of Harlem where the story takes place. Have any students been to this part of Manhattan? What are their impressions of the area today?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Literature • Social Studies • Art • Writing

1. After reading all or part of the book, discuss historical fiction as a type of literature, a mixture of fact and fiction. Some of the people mentioned in the story actually existed and many of the events really occurred. Even those characters that are created by the author probably shared some of the experiences and feelings of real people. Discuss how the reader can distinguish between what is fact and what is fiction. Groups of students might try researching events and people mentioned in the story using sources such as the internet, encyclopedias, almanacs, atlases, historical documents, newspapers, etc. Have a mini-lesson about how to use these sources and a class “debriefing.” What names and events could they read about in other sources? Which were most likely created by the author?
2. This story exposes children to what life was like for one child living during the Harlem Renaissance, but there is so much more to learn about this interesting time in American history.
 - This story takes place in 1928, during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. What can you learn about the famous people, arts and music of this time and place? Use the brief history on pages 90 and 91 for ideas to get started. Consult a variety of sources—including books, encyclopedias, old newspapers, the internet, museums, and musical recordings.
 - This story focuses on life in Harlem in 1928. What was life like for African Americans in other parts of the country at that time?
 - Choose any aspect of the Harlem Renaissance to investigate further. Brainstorm a list of possible topics as a class. Encourage students to be creative and draw on all five senses when thinking about all there is to learn about this time period.
3. On a big sheet of chart paper, start a list of expressions found in the story, with additional columns for the page number on which it is found, a translation, and a space to indicate whether the expression is still used today. (Example; “the cat’s meow,” page 13.) To follow up on this activity, present students with this expression: “You can’t judge a book by its cover.” Discuss its meaning. Then ask students to reflect in journals on how this applies to the story, or in particular to the librarian, Miss Washington. You might also ask them to write about a time in their own lives when they misjudged a person or event.
4. Lily’s friend Anna’s father was hanged by a mob and Anna told Lily “it seemed like there were lynchings all the time in Georgia” (page 29). As late as 1927, Congress had still not yet passed the Dyer bill outlawing lynchings. And most clubs in Harlem wouldn’t allow blacks in as customers (page 35). Make a class time-line showing when various laws were passed outlawing discrimination against African Americans.

5. Listen to as much music as possible from this time period. If possible, invite a jazz musician—a parent, high school student, or member of the community—to come in and play for your students. If this person is knowledgeable about the history of jazz, encourage him or her to share this, too. Find out about local jazz venues in your community and plan a class “night out” with students and their families.
6. In addition to listening to the music from the Harlem Renaissance, learn to dance to it! Rent a dance video showing how to do the Lindy Hop and/or other dances from the time period. This is a great activity for a rainy day or an afternoon when you sense your students need a break from their seats. Perhaps the P.E. or movement teacher could collaborate with you on this project.
7. Although Lily lived in a different time and perhaps a different place, no doubt your students will identify with her in many ways. Hand out several sticky notes to each student and have them note “text-to-self” connections while reading. When they identify with a feeling or situation Lily experiences, have them briefly jot down what it reminded them about in their own lives and stick it on that page. You may want to model this for them using this exercise on another book. Later, in small reading groups, invite students to share these connections with one another.

STORY EXTENSIONS

Celebrate the Harlem Renaissance!

Have a party celebrating all you’ve learned about the Harlem Renaissance. Of course you’ll need jazz playing, so students can take turns being the disc jockey using tapes or cds from the library or their own collections. Clear space for a dance floor so students can show off the new dance steps they’ve learned (see # 6, above). You may want to pause the music after a while to have students perform readings of poetry or excerpts of books by authors from the time. When planning the party, re-read the pages describing the food served at the rent party Lily attended (pages 38-39) and have students bring in dishes from home. In the weeks leading up to the party, you could study a painter from the period and have the classroom hanging with artwork inspired by the artist. Have fun and let the students add their own ideas!

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STUDY GUIDE

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