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*She Sang for the Mountains:
The Story of Singer, Songwriter, Activist
Jean Ritchie*
by Shannon Hitchcock
illustrated by Sophie Page

SUMMARY

This lyrical picture book biography of songwriter and activist Jean Ritchie-Singer traces her life from the Cumberland Mountains of Kentucky to New York City and beyond as her protest songs inspired a nation. The author and illustrator previously teamed up for the stunning biography *Saving Granddaddy's Stories: Ray Hicks, the Voice of Appalachia*.

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Jean was born in 1922 in Viper, Kentucky, deep in the heart of the Cumberland Mountains. She was the youngest of 14 children. Her autobiography *Singing Family of the Cumberlands* (1955) was illustrated by Maurice Sendak. Jean passed away in 2015 at the age of 92.

- To read a more detailed biography about Jean, see the Author's Note in the book.

Book Talk Blurb

Do you like reading books about real people? If so, you'll enjoy this biography about a woman who loved to sing. Her name is Jean Ritchie. Jean grew up in the state of Kentucky, in the Cumberland Mountains. (Display Kentucky on a physical or digital map.) As you are reading *She Sang for the Mountains*, you'll learn why Ritchie needed to sing for the mountains. I can't wait to hear what you think about the unique illustrations in this book.

Set Purpose: Invitation to Readers

Have you ever heard of a singer named Jean Ritchie? If not, I have great news! We're going to read a biography about her. Remember, a biography is a true story about a person's life. Let's think about the title of this biography, *She Sang for the Mountains: The Story of Singer, Songwriter, Activist Jean Ritchie*. What can you infer from that title? (Discuss the meaning of the word *activist* and how her songs must have had something to do with the mountains.) [Let's get started.](#)

During Reading

Read-Aloud Conversation Starters

(Note: It may be helpful to number the pages of this book for reference, where the first two pages are pages 2-3.)

- Page 7: On snowy winter nights, Jean snuggled in her featherbed as the wind whistled through the chimney. [What do you think the author means when she writes, "Music was everywhere if you knew how to listen." Where do you hear music?](#)
- Page 15: Though Jean was far from home, she had something to protest, too. [What are the people protesting?](#) (coal mining) [How did Jean join the protest?](#) (She wrote a song.) [What are some other ways that people protest?](#)
- Page 17: Jean published her protest songs under the name Than Hall. [Why do you suppose Jean believed that a man's protest music would be taken more seriously? Do you think that is true today? Discuss your thinking with a friend.](#)
- Page 25: It ripped trees from the forests, filled valleys with rocks and dirt, left the mountains desolate, bare, and ugly. [How does this page make you feel? What would you do if you saw this happening to your home?](#)
- Page 31: who raise their voices and sing for the mountains. [Tell your friend something you learned about Jean Ritchie. Why do you think Jean was called an activist?](#)

For a read-aloud video of this book, visit <http://www.reycraftbooks.com/videos.html>.

Respond, Reflect, React, or Research

- **Reflect on SEL Competency—Responsible Decision-Making:** Remind students that Jean Ritchie saw a problem and wrote songs to explain to others why the mining companies should stop coal mining, strip mining, and mountaintop removal. Point out that responsible decision-makers notice problems and look for ways to solve them. Invite students to identify problems in the school or community. Encourage them to brainstorm some actions they might take to try to solve the problem.
- **Respond—Read Like a Writer (Illustration Study):** Tell students that Sophie Page illustrated this book in a unique way. She designed mixed-media dioramas. Have students look at a few pages in the book and discuss how Page uses a combination of art media as tools to put together the scenes on each page. Then ask them to think about how they might use different art media or tools when they are creating images to go with their writing.
- **Reflect on Comprehension—Using a Repeated Sentence to Infer the Main Idea:** Discuss how authors will sometimes repeat words, phrases, or sentences to emphasize a point or help us remember important parts of a book. Ask students if they remember a sentence we hear again and again in *She Sang for the Mountains*? (“Jean raised her voice and sang for the mountains.”) Invite them to explain how this repeated sentence helps them infer the main idea of this biography.



Real World Action

Be an activist! Remind students that Ritchie was an activist, and that activists notice problems in their communities or countries and work to solve them. Invite students to think of some other ways to be an activist and work for change. These might include teaching others about the problem or issue, writing a letter to a business or to a person in power, conducting a survey about an issue and sharing the results, volunteering in your community.



If your students liked this book . . .

Planting Stories:

The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré

by Anika Aldamuy Denise

illustrated by Paola Escobar

New York: HarperCollins, 2019

In the 1920s, Pura Belpré shared her abuela’s stories from Puerto Rico with the children who gathered at her feet in the New York Public Library. As Pura told and published her stories, she planted seeds—seeds that changed many young readers’ lives.

Saving Granddaddy’s Stories:

Ray Hicks, the Voice of Appalachia

by Shannon Hitchcock

illustrated by Sophie Page

New York: Reycraft Books, 2020

As a young boy living in the Appalachian Mountains, Ray Hicks loved his grandfather’s stories because he told them “the mountain way.” After his grandfather’s death, Ray continued to tell these stories to anyone who would listen. Years later, his storytelling became so famous that he was known as the “Voice of Appalachia.”

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