



Lexile Level 610; AD610L; MSL 7.702; MLF 3.643; Decoding 71; Decoding Display High; Semantic 84; Semantic Display Very High; Syntactic 80; Syntactic Display High; Structure 83; Structure Display Very High Guided Reading Level Q, Grade Level Equivalent 4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3,4,4a,5,5a,5b,5c,6; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.4.3,3a,4,4a,4c; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.1,2,3,4,5,6,8,9,10; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1,1c,1d,2,3,4,5,6; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.4,7,8,9,9a,9b,10

Educational Description: Literary non-fiction, biography.

Themes: cultural diversity, asylum from Russia, music, history, composing.

Storytelling elements: plot and character development, cause and effect relationships, conflict and resolution, detailed illustrations and figurative language enhance meaning and tone; hyperbole, metaphor, simile, visualization.

New vocabulary: Yiddish, Russian.

Informational back matter; Note from the author.

Curriculum Connections: Music, Determination, Patriotism, American culture, Immigration, Creativity

A Curriculum/Discussion Guide based upon the picture book written by Nancy Churnin and illustrated by James Roy Sanchez

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Discussion Questions

- 1) Irving came from Russia, a very different culture than America, but he created songs that feel distinctly American, like *God Bless America*. What does it mean to be American?
 - a. What makes a song, story, book, or movie “feel” American?
 - b. Who defines “Americanness?”
 - c. What makes someone American?
 - d. Was Irving Berlin American?
- 2) Irving contributed hugely to American culture, so much so that he received the Congressional Gold Medal in 1955. Can you name other immigrants who have shaped American arts, music, drama?
- 3) Irving was Jewish but he wrote the classic Christmas song, *White Christmas*. Does it change the meaning of the song to know that a Jewish person wrote it? Does it matter? Why or why not?
- 4) How did Irving adapt to New York, his new home?

- a. How was New York different from his old Russian village?
 - b. Was it easy for him to survive in his new home? Why or why not?
- 5) How did Irving's experience as an immigrant shape his music?
- a. What kinds of stories do his songs tell?
- 6) What role did patriotism play in Irving's songs?
- a. How did he give back to the country that allowed him a new start in life?
- 7) Some people feel that immigrants are a drain on American society. Others feel that immigrants make important contributions. What do you think? List your reasons for your opinion.
- 8) Make a list of immigrants who have become famous or important to American society. Make a list of immigrants who have committed horrible crimes or damaged American society.
- a. How would you find names for each of these lists? Where would you look?
 - b. Which list was easier to make? Which list is longer?
- 9) How did Irving manage to write songs anyway?
- a. Where did he get his ideas?
 - b. If you had to write a song, what would you write about? Would you start with the words or the melody?
 - c. Try writing a short simple song yourself. If it's too hard to make up a tune, use a melody you already know, but write new words to go with the music.
 - d. Irving's songs had a lot of puns and clever word play that made them popular. Try fitting a pun into your song lyrics.
- 10) Listen to some of Irving's music and pick a favorite song. Write a paragraph about why you like that song, what it means to you.
- a. Have your class listen to several songs and vote on which one they like best. Is one song a clear favorite or does everyone choose differently?
 - b. Why do you think certain songs have more appeal to people?
 - c. Talk about what works and what doesn't in each song.

Writing/Storytelling Strategies

- 1) *Irving Berlin, the Boy Who Made America Sing* is a picture book. How does the art add to the story? Give specific examples where the pictures provide information the text doesn't.
- 2) How does the style and palette (the choice of colors) affect the mood of the story? Give examples of specific pages to explain your opinion.

- 3) Try drawing your own picture to go with a page of the story. Decide how you would present or interpret what the words are saying. Make sure you do something very different from what the illustrator, James Rey Sanchez, has already done. A good page to try this with is the third spread:

"God bless America," his mother said.

"God bless America," Irving whispered. He could hear the Statue singing her own special song. One day, Irving promised himself, I am going to write a song just for her.

- 4) Listen to one of Irving's son and write a description of it.
- Do you think the author conveyed well a sense of Irving's music? Why or why not?

Extra credit: Watch a movie that Irving Berlin wrote the music to. There are many classic Hollywood films that feature his songs. Pick one and then write about how the songs help tell the story of the movie, how they help create a certain mood or show somebody's character. Pick a favorite song and explain why you've chosen it.

The Irving Berlin Project

Make America Sing

Is there someone in your class or community who immigrated to America from another country as Irving Berlin did?

Tell us the coolest thing you learned about that person's country – perhaps it's a special food, music, language, art, custom, clothing, photos or history of their home country.

When did your family come to America and what country or countries did they come from?

Please share a special food, music, language, art custom, clothing, photos or history that gives you pride in your heritage. We'll post your stories and photos on MAKE AMERICA SING, a special page on nancychurnin.com.

Fast Facts about Irving Berlin

- The U.S. Postal Service honored Irving Berlin with a commemorative stamp in 2002. The portrait of Irving Berlin is a colorized version of a 1932 black and white photograph by Edward Steichen. It's superimposed over his handwritten score of "God Bless America" and features his signature at the bottom.
- In 1918, the 20-year-old George Gershwin asked Irving for a job as his pianist. He took one of Irving's songs and played it back to him with such brilliant improvisation that it was hard to recognize. Irving asked George what he really wanted to do. When George told him he wanted to be a songwriter, Irving told him to forget about being his pianist and to pursue his dream. A year later, George had his first big hit, "Swanee," with words by Irving Caesar.

- The United States Congress awarded the Congressional Gold Medal to Irving Berlin in 1954 for "God Bless America" and to George and his brother Ira Gershwin in 1985. George said of Irving: "I frankly believe that Irving Berlin is the greatest songwriter that ever lived...His songs are exquisite cameos of perfection, and each one of them is beautiful as its neighbor."
- In 1921, Irving created a partnership with Sam Harris to build the Music Box Theater on Broadway at 239 West 45th St. in New York. For years, it was a showcase for Irving's shows. The Berlin family sold the theater to Shubert in 2007, but it still includes an exhibit devoted to Irving in the lobby, including a bronze plaque, murals, vintage photographs, newspaper clippings, sheet music covers and costume sketches.
- Irving insisted that his 1943 Broadway show, *This Is the Army*, which featured soldiers and raised money for the U.S. Army, be integrated, making his company the only one to do so in what was then a segregated army. If the company traveled to a camp, station or city that was segregated, the whole cast and crew would join the black soldiers where they ate and slept.
- President Ronald Reagan was one of the stars of the 1943 *This Is the Army* movie.
- King George VI, Queen Elizabeth and their two daughters, the future Queen Elizabeth and Princess Margaret, met Irving Berlin after a performance of *This Is the Army* in 1943.
- In 1944, Irving Berlin was invited to lunch with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. It was an awkward meeting as Churchill, who knew as little about musical theater as Irving Berlin did about politics, thought he had invited the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Churchill asked Irving his opinion about President Franklin Roosevelt's chances to be re-elected for a fourth term and was perplexed when Irving said he planned to vote for Roosevelt as Churchill didn't understand how a British citizen could vote for an American president.
- Irving only knew how to play the piano in F sharp. To make his songs sound different, he bought pianos with special keyboards that changed the key so he could play the same notes, but make different sounds.
- Irving never had a real musical training or education. He never learned how to play the piano well. Instead, he often hired pianists to play his songs and add harmonies. George Gershwin, the son of Jewish immigrants from Russia, applied for a job as Irving's pianist. Irving turned him down because he said George should be writing his own music. George went on to write some of America's most beloved music on his own and with his brother and lyricist Ira Gershwin. Together, the brothers received the Congressional Gold Medal in 1985. The Gershwins are another example of immigrants contributing to American culture.

- Because Irving wasn't a pianist, he used special transposing pianos. You can see one of them at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia. A second transposing piano in 1947 that he donated to the Smithsonian Institution in 1972 and is still on display there.

