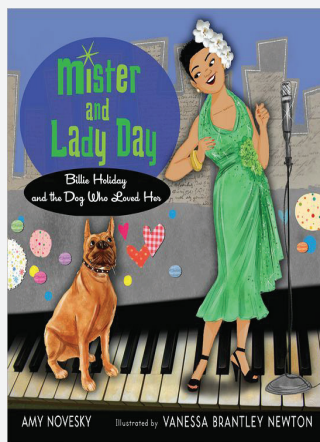


## First Opinion: An Unconditional Love

Novesky, Amy. *Mister and Lady Day: Billie Holiday and the Dog Who Loved Her*. Illus. Vanessa Brantley Newton. New York: Harcourt Children's Books, 2013.

*Sharon Dennis Wyeth*



*Mister and Lady Day: Billie Holiday and the Dog Who Loved Her*, written by Amy Novesky and illustrated by Vanessa Brantley Newton, provides an upbeat introduction to the life of celebrated jazz singer Billie Holiday (1915–1959). Focusing on Holiday's relationship with her favorite dog, Novesky draws readers in through humor and the story of a friendship they will readily identify with. Newton's soulful illustrations, embellished with details of the artist's profession, portray Holiday as a glamorous yet solitary figure, capable of great affection.

The book begins with its single depiction of Holiday as a child. Readers see her singing "along to her favorite songs on a borrowed gramophone" and learn that "She dreamed of becoming a star . . ." (4–5). With a turn of the page, the dream is realized in the form of a grown-up Lady Day with flowers in her hair, sitting backstage in her dressing room. The sweetly-framed photographs of dogs on the star's dressing table (where one might expect to find photos of family or friends of the human variety) lead us to the heart of the story. "Lady Day's dogs were her best friends of all" (6–7).

Though Holiday had a number of dogs, including "the poodle she carried in her coat pocket" (8), readers learn that "Mister was Lady's favorite" (15). Mister, a muscular yet non-threatening boxer, is an utterly loyal companion. He stands guard at the door in her dressing room to keep fans "at a polite distance" (17). When Lady Day is performing, Mister waits for her in the wings (19). In turn, the singer lavishes affection upon her favorite dog. When Lady Day

takes Mister on a “midnight walk,” they are both dressed in mink (12–13). She makes sure that Mister has “plates of thick steak” to eat before her shows at Harlem clubs (16). In a sensuous and playful spread that includes song lyrics, Lady sings to Mister (14–15). There’s no spoken dialogue in the book, however, and none is required to convey the unconditional love between Mister and Lady Day.

What is missing is evidence of the obstacles Billie Holiday faced as a Black, female artist working and traveling during an era of segregation. And though we’re told early in the story that “sometimes stars don’t feel like shining” (6), alluding to the celebrity’s inner sadness, readers are left to wonder why this famous star feels that way. Some details regarding Holiday’s difficult childhood might have provided a hint.

A more striking omission occurs during the book’s crucial transition when Lady Day and Mister are forced to separate. Readers are told of a time when “Lady got into trouble. She had to leave home for a year and a day. And Mister couldn’t come” (20). Though the author’s notes at the back of the book inform us that Billie Holiday struggled with drug addiction and spent time in prison (32), an attempt to specify Lady Day’s “trouble” within the body of the story would have deepened this biography, lending it greater relevance and reality.

After their separation, Lady Day and Mister are joyfully reunited (24–25). At Lady Day’s triumphant concert at New York City’s Carnegie Hall, Mister is listening in the wings (30–31). The life and times of Billie Holiday bring up difficult topics: abandonment, racism, substance abuse, and incarceration. These same issues touch the lives of some of our current readership. I regret that the author has chosen to leave these issues out of the story. When parents and educators are compelled to discuss tough topics with their children and students, they are challenged to grapple with language. In some instances, it falls to the writer to help them find the right words.

## Works Cited

Novesky, Amy. *Mister and Lady Day: Billie Holiday and the Dog Who Loved Her*. Illus. Vanessa Brantley Newton. Boston, New York: Harcourt Children’s Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. Print.

## About the Author

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