

HOLIDAY HOUSE EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



Desert Song

by **Laekan Zea Kemp** · illustrated by **Beatriz Gutiérrez Hernández**

★ “Perfectly orchestrated: brava!”—*Kirkus Reviews*, Starred Review

★ “[A] lyrical picture book.”—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

ABOUT THE BOOK

A family joins the music of the desert night in this tale of tradition and memory from Pura Belpré Honor author Laekan Zea Kemp.

*It starts with a soft tapping,
Uncle Eduardo drumming his hands
against his dusty jeans.*

As the blush of sunset gives way to night in the desert, coyotes, cicadas, and barn owls emerge, each calling out to the moon. Watching from their porch, the family joins the song. One by one, each relative offers their drums, flute, maracas, strings, and voices.

They sing with the insects, birds, snakes, and toads; they sing with their ancestors, an audience glittering in the stars overhead. With each strum of passed-down instruments, memories renew, and those gone are alive and near again.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are the colors of the desert? Point out these colors as the book is read. Describe the desert sky. Explain what the author means by, “The sun rules in the desert” (p. 1). How do the colors change at night? What creatures appear in the desert night?
- Consider the Spanish version of the book. Discuss why the exact location of the desert isn’t revealed. How might the desert be located in different countries, including the United States?
- Identify the main character on the first double-page spread. Study the house and the items on the porch in this spread. What do you learn about the family? How is the moon “a memory of the sun”? (p. 13).
- Metaphor is figurative language that describes something by comparing it to something else. Explain the following metaphor on page 3: “They howl and buzz and hoot—a chorus in need of a band.” The next page introduces Uncle Eduardo and Aunt Ofelia. Discuss the music they are creating. What instruments do Thiago, Esme, and Grandma bring to the band? How does the boy’s guitar differ from Grandma’s? Discuss the father’s role in the band.
- Simile is another type of figurative language that uses “like” or “as” to compare two things. Explain the following similes: “Lightning strikes, like a spotlight. Thunder rolls like a hollow drum” (p. 24). Identify other similes in the book.
- What is an ancestor? How is the book about remembering ancestors? Explain what the boy’s father means when he says the family makes music “to remind us that they’re [ancestors] still alive between the notes” (p. 17). How does the boy feel connected to his ancestors?
- Take a close look at the Spanish version of the book. What type of music do you think the family is making? Describe their instruments. What sounds do you hear as the book is read? Make the sounds of the coyotes, cicadas, owls, and other night birds that the boy hears. Then create a band by making these sounds in unison.
- Ask a Spanish-speaking person to read the book aloud page by page in Spanish as someone else reads it in English. Think about the music this reading creates. How is the book like poetry? How does this reading celebrate “one people” in a vast world?

Guide created by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

Simultaneously
published in Spanish as
Canción del desierto!

HC: 9780823457977



ABOUT THE CREATORS

Photo Credit: Diana Ascarrunz



Laekan Zea Kemp is a writer living in Austin, Texas. She is the author of *Desert Song*, *A Crown for Corina*, *The Pura Belpré Honor Book Somewhere Between Bitter and Sweet*, and several other novels. She has three objectives when it comes to storytelling: to make people laugh, cry, and crave Mexican food. Her work celebrates Chicane grit, resilience, creativity, and joy while exploring themes of identity and mental health. Learn more at LaekanZeaKemp.com.



Beatriz Gutiérrez Hernández is an illustrator and animator born and raised in Guadalajara, Mexico. She graduated from Pratt Institute with a BFA in communications design and lived in Brooklyn, New York, for several years. She is the illustrator of *Desert Song* by Laekan Zea Kemp and *Dreams from Many Rivers* by Margarita Engle, and is the author and illustrator of *Benito Juárez Fights for Justice*, which received a Ezra Jack Keats Honor for Illustrator. Learn more at BeatrizGutierrezH.com.



HolidayHouse.com



#DesertSong