

# Build a House

by RHIANNON GIDDENS

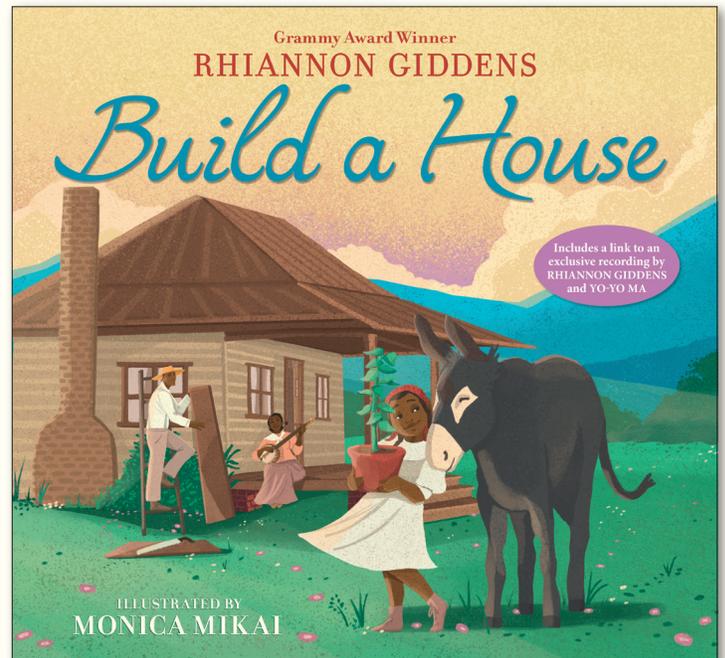
illustrated by MONICA MIKAI

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*I learned your words and wrote my song  
I put my story down.*

Written as a song to commemorate the 155th anniversary of Juneteenth—which was originally performed with famed cellist Yo-Yo Ma—and paired here with beautiful, bold illustrations, *Build a House* tells the powerful story of a people who would not be moved and the music that sustained them. Steeped in sorrow and joy, resilience and resolve, turmoil and transcendence, this poetic debut offers a proud view of history and a vital message for readers of all ages: honor your heritage, express your truth, and let your voice soar, even—or perhaps especially—when your heart is heaviest. Grammy Award winner Rhiannon Giddens celebrates Black history and culture in her unflinching, uplifting, and gorgeously illustrated picture book debut.

This teachers' guide prompts students to think about ways we can create the feeling that home often brings. It also encourages them to think about areas in their life where joy can be found. It offers discussion questions and classroom activities for teachers working with students in grades 2–5.



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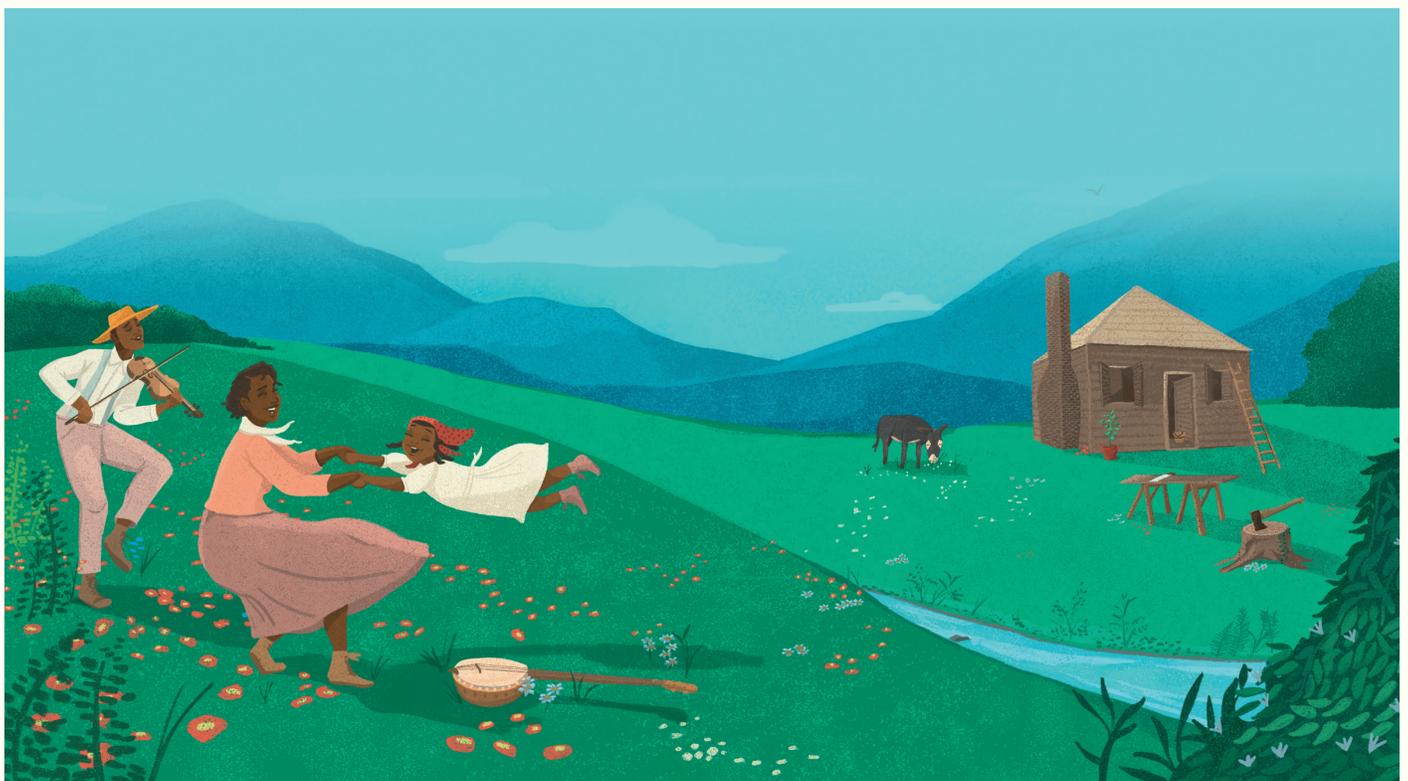
Also available as an e-book and as an e-book with audio

## COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

This guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Before reading the book, look closely at the cover illustration. What do you notice about the people in the illustration? What do you notice about the area around the house?
2. The beginning of the book shows a family riding away in a wagon led by a man and horse. Where do you think they might be heading? Do their expressions show that they are excited about this journey?
3. "You brought me here / To build your house / And grow your garden / Fine." Think about a garden you may have seen before. How is this different? Do you think the people had a choice in working here?
4. The family is told to "GO" by the same man who moved them in the beginning of the book and watched as they worked in cotton fields. Why do you think they are being sent away from the land they were brought to?
5. On the next spread, the family is shown dancing and enjoying music. Why do you think their emotions have changed?
6. What do you think this story is about?
7. Rhiannon Giddens wrote a song with the same title as this book to help her think about lots of the events happening in our world. Yo-Yo Ma worked with her to complete it. Did your thoughts about what the story is about change after listening? Why or why not?
8. Throughout most of the book, the young girl carries something with her as the family moves from place to place. What is it? How does it change from the beginning of the story to the end?
9. During and after enslavement, families rarely had a choice about where they could live. Why do you think the girl and her family were able to finally plant the tree that she had carried for so long?
10. Juneteenth is a national holiday that began in Galveston, Texas, to celebrate the announcement of freedom for enslaved people in Texas. What moments in this story would you have celebrated? Why?



## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### FEELING AT HOME

In the afterword, the author writes that this story “shows one of the best things about being human: how we keep finding ways to make our family and our home, no matter where we are.” Ask students to think about a time when they were in a new place and what made them feel calm or at home. Have students write three to four sentences and share with partners or in a small group.

### FINDING JOY

Throughout the story, musical instruments appear to be a source of joy for the family. Talk about what joy is and complete a circle map for students to contribute to during the discussion. Afterward, have students draw pictures of things/people that may be important or a source of joy to them. After illustrating these, use sentence stems (if needed) to allow further explanation of their importance. After completing the writing portion, allow students to share with partners or in small groups.

Example: \_\_\_\_\_ is important to me because \_\_\_\_\_.

Example: \_\_\_\_\_ brings me joy because \_\_\_\_\_.

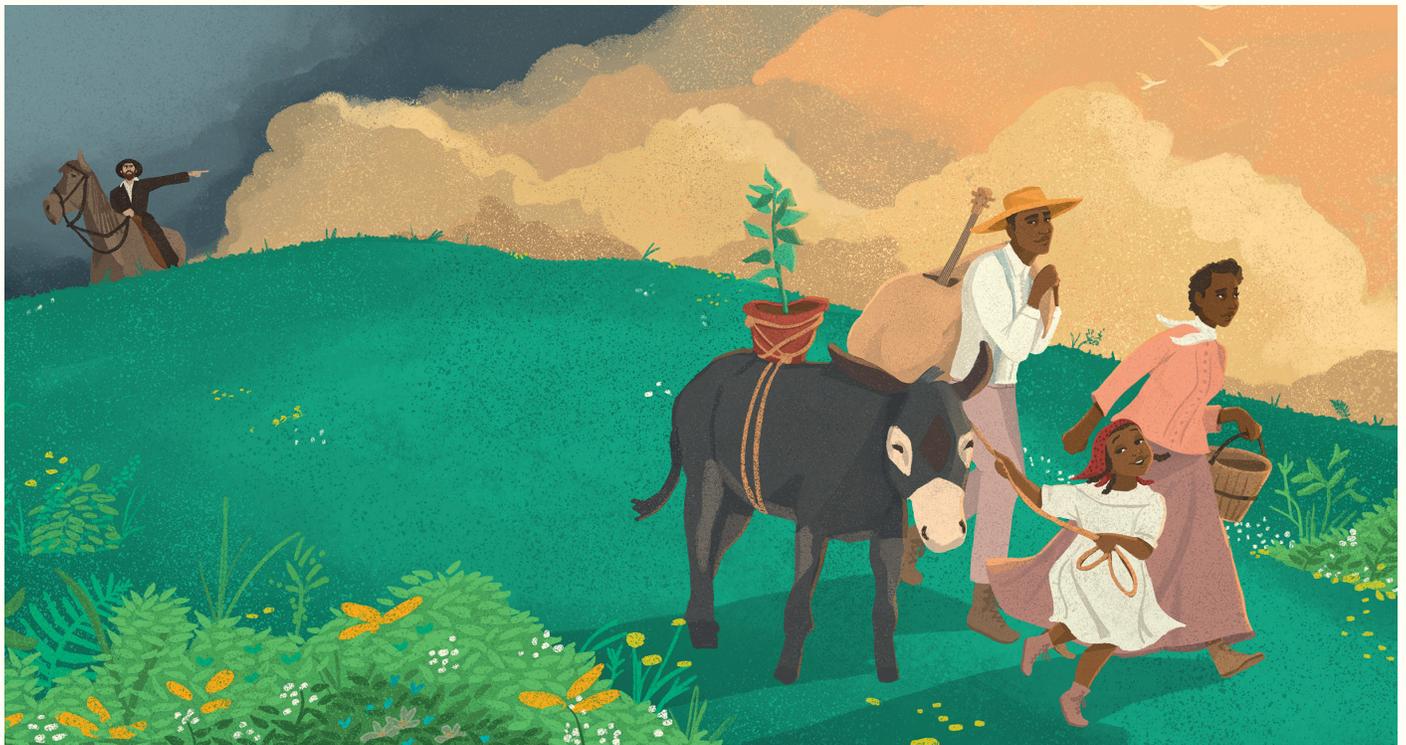
### A FLAG OF YOUR OWN

The author wrote the song that inspired this book to commemorate the 155th anniversary of Juneteenth. During Juneteenth celebrations, you will often see a flag that shares the same colors as the US flag. Allow students to research the flag’s symbolism. After researching, allow time for students to create a flag that could be used to represent who they are or something important to them. Encourage them to write a brief explanation to accompany the flag.

Example: *I chose to use \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.*

### BUILD YOUR HOUSE

With your students, listen to Rhiannon Giddens and Yo-Yo Ma perform “Build Your House.” After listening, allow students to make observations about what they heard and how the music makes them feel. An additional exploration may include research on the use of the banjo in the United States. Consider where the instrument originated, how it reached the United States, and where it is still used today. You might create a presentation as a class to share your learning with the wider school community.



## ABOUT RHIANNON GIDDENS



Photo by Ebru Yildiz

Rhiannon Giddens cofounded the Grammy Award–winning Carolina Chocolate Drops and the Black female supergroup Our Native Daughters. She is the recipient of a 2022 Grammy Award for Best Folk Album for her collaboration with Francesco Turrisi on *They're Calling Me Home*, and she has been nominated for additional

Grammys as a soloist and collaborator. A musician, singer, songwriter, actor, librettist, and MacArthur Fellow, she serves as artistic director at Silkroad and performed for the Obamas at the White House. Rhiannon Giddens lives in Ireland.

## ABOUT MONICA MIKAI



Monica Mikai studied painting and earned an MFA at the New York Studio School. She is the illustrator of *The Proudest Color* by Sheila Modir and Jeffrey Kashou and *My Mother's Wildest Dreams* by John Light Jr. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

This guide was prepared by Antonia Adams, a Texas educator from the Houston area. She is an active member of the National Council of Teachers of English.

