



**Classroom Guide for  
HOW WE ARE SMART**  
by W. Nikola-Lisa  
Illustrated by Sean Qualls

### Reading Level

\*Reading Level: Grades 3-4  
Interest Level: Grades 2-8  
Guided Reading Level: T

\*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

### Themes

Learning, Creativity, Self-Esteem, Diversity, Occupations, Multiple Intelligences

### National Standards

LANGUAGE ARTS: Reading for Perspective; Participating in Society; Communication Skills; Multicultural Understanding; Understanding the Human Experience  
SOCIAL STUDIES: People, Places and Environments; Individual Development and Identity  
SCIENCE: Science as Inquiry

### Synopsis

*How We Are Smart* includes twelve biographies of successful and diverse people in various fields. The author has chosen these people to show that they are all smart, but in different ways. Each spread focuses on one person and tells through a direct quotation, poems and nonfiction text what that person accomplished and the ways in which he or she was smart. Through these biographical sketches, students learn about multiple intelligences and that they, too, are smart in unique and different ways.

### Background

The idea for this book came from the work of Harvard University psychologist Dr. Howard Gardner, who developed the theory of multiple intelligences. The theory, popularized by Dr. Thomas Armstrong, an educator and psychologist, includes eight ways of being smart. They are Body Smart, Logic Smart, Music Smart, Nature Smart,

People Smart, Picture Smart, Self Smart, and Word Smart. Information about each kind of intelligence, along with traits, interests, and activities associated with it, is included at the back of the book in a form accessible to students, along with some interesting activities.

**Teaching Tip**

*How We Are Smart* is a useful book to introduce in February as part of your observance of Black History Month. While only some of the people featured are African American, all those profiled have had to overcome many of the same kinds of discrimination and racial issues as African Americans.

**BEFORE READING****Prereading Focus Questions**

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. What does it mean to be smart? Are all people smart in the same way? What are some different ways of being smart?
2. What are some good ways to learn new things? How do you learn best?
3. What kinds of poetry do you enjoy? Why? How is poetry different from prose in conveying information?
4. What is a biography? Why are biographies of interest to readers? What can you learn from them?
5. What are some things you can do well that a friend or classmate cannot? What are some things you could teach your friend or classmate? How could you help a friend or classmate improve his or her skills?

**Exploring the Book**

Talk about the book title. Ask students what they think the title means. What do you think the book is about?

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: dedication; letter from the author and illustrator; quotation, poem, and biographical material for each person profiled; illustrations; and backmatter, including explanations of the eight intelligences, activities, further reading, and resources.

**Setting a Purpose for Reading**

Have students read to find out about the eight ways of being smart, how these different intelligences are shown in what people can do well, and the ways in which students themselves are smart.

**VOCABULARY**

Write the word "smart" on the chalkboard and ask students to name synonyms for the word. Provide print or online dictionaries for the class to use.

Write these rhyming words from the book on the board, then ask students to add other rhyming words to each group. Challenge students to find additional rhymes in the book.

ways	do	stage	soar	a-buzz
days	flu	age	floor	was
kind	law	heights	love	path
mind	saw	rights	above	math
eye	exact	fame	drive	spaces
sky	impact	name	alive	places

Have students make mini-dictionaries of words related to each field or career covered in this book. For example, for physicist Luis Alvarez students might include the following words: physics, physicist, invention, technologies, experimental, detection, meteorite, atomic bomb, radar.

### **AFTER READING**

#### **Discussion Questions**

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and illustrations in the book to support their responses.

1. In what way(s) was Luis Alvarez smart? What are some problems he solved?
2. How did Maria Tallchief show that she was body smart?
3. What were some of the accomplishments of Thurgood Marshall?
4. How did Annie Jump Cannon develop her interests?
5. How did Tito Puente share his music smarts?
6. How did Patsy Takemoto Mink use her people smarts?
7. What did Matthew Henson think a person needed to achieve great accomplishments?
8. How did Georgia O'Keefe express the way she was smart?
9. What were some of the ways Alexander Posey used his word smarts?
10. What kind of challenges did Marian Anderson face in her career?
11. How does I. M. Pei use his nature smarts in his architecture?

12. How was Ynés Mexía smart? How did she use this gift?

### Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for phrases that describe the background of each person.
- The **Illustrator** might make alternate pictures in different styles or media for the illustrations.
- The **Connector** might find information about other people who are smart in the same ways as some of the people in the book.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of each person featured in the book.
- The **Investigator** might find more information about each person.

\*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *Getting Started with Literature Circles* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *Literature Circles: Voice And Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *Literature Circles Resource Guide* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

### Reader's Response

Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize what they have read. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, essays, or oral discussion.

1. What are some characteristics the people in this book have in common? How did these traits help them succeed?
2. President Barack Obama has told students that "being successful is hard." Give examples of why the people in this book would agree with him.
3. Think about the different ways information about each person is given in the book—through a quotation, poem, text, and illustration. Which form is most interesting to you? Why?
4. Many people in the book had childhood interests that suggested future careers. What interests do you have that might indicate a career or field to pursue? What might you do to develop these interests?

### Other Writing Activities

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for students to share and discuss their work.

1. Choose one of the people featured in the book. Make a list of questions you would like to ask that person.

2. Choose someone you admire. Write a poem telling how that person is smart.
3. Choose one of the people in the book to research further. Then write a feature magazine article about that person.

### **ELL/ESL Teaching Strategies**

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Read the poems aloud several times to help students access information.
2. Invite students to write or dictate questions about people in the book. Set aside time to help students explore and answer these queries.
3. Like some of the people in *How We Are Smart*, ELL students have to overcome numerous challenges to succeed. Use the stories in the book to help inspire students.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES**

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas.

#### **Social Studies**

1. Point out that Patsy Takemoto Mink was a congresswoman. Interested students might find out more about members of the House of Representatives. Questions to pursue include:
  - Who are the representatives from your state?
  - How is a representative chosen? How often?
  - What are the responsibilities of a representative?
  - Where does a representative work?
2. Thurgood Marshall was a United States Supreme Court Justice from 1967 to 1991. Have students find out who the Justices are today and write brief biographies for them.
3. Use a globe or world map to help students trace some of the journeys of Matthew Henson. Discuss the significance of the Panama Canal to ships and the North Pole to sailors.

#### **Science**

1. To honor Annie Jump Cannon, you might turn a bulletin board into a night sky by covering it with dark blue paper. Have students use silver star stickers to show the stars and constellations in a night sky.
2. Discuss why Ynés Mexía collected plants from such hard-to-reach places. Tell students that medicines and many other products often come from such plants. Remind students that Mexía sorted the specimens she collected. Bring in examples of different kinds of plant leaves and challenge students to sort them by different criteria such as size, color, shape, lobes, and edges.

**Music**

1. Hold a concert in which you play the music of Tito Puente. If any students know Latin dances, encourage them to teach other students.
2. Introduce students to the beautiful voice of Marian Anderson by playing selections from her recordings.

**Art**

1. Have students become familiar with Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings, either in books, as prints, or from online images. Talk about how O'Keeffe interpreted everyday objects such as paintings of flowers, rocks, shells, and animal bones in her paintings. Follow up by bringing in objects from nature for students to paint, or let students bring in their own objects.
2. If possible, bring in some architectural blueprints for students to look at. Explain that architects such as I. M. Pei make these drawings as guides for builders to construct buildings. Provide graph paper and have students draw floor plans of the classroom or a room in their homes.
3. Explain that people are often honored on postage stamps. Have students design a stamp to honor Maria Tallchief, Luis Alvarez, or Alexander Posey. Ask students to write a paragraph describing and explaining their designs.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**W. Nikola-Lisa** has written more than twenty books for children, several of which are published by Lee & Low Books. These include *Bein' with You This Way*, *Summer Sun Risin'*, *My Teacher Can Teach . . . Anyone!*, and *America: My Land, Your Land, Our Land*. Nikola-Lisa grew up in southern Texas and currently resides in Chicago. He began teaching in elementary schools in the late 1970s and then went on to get his doctorate. He is a professor of education at National-Louis University. Nikola-Lisa spends a great deal of time visiting classrooms and doing readings, often with puppets and music.

**ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR**

**Sean Qualls** is the illustrator of many award-winning children's books including *Dizzy*; *Powerful Words*; *The Baby on the Way*; *Before John Was a Jazz Giant*; and *The Poet Slave of Cuba*. He has also created illustrations for magazines, newspapers, and advertisements. Qualls' work has been shown in galleries in New York City and across the country. He draws his inspiration from many sources including childhood memories, movies, television, nature, music, and literature. Qualls lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife and their children.

Awards and honors *How We Are Smart* has received include:

- Christopher Award, Books for Young Readers category
- Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Awards, Honorable Mention

**Book Information**

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### RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about *How We Are Smart* at

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/64/pb/how\\_we\\_are\\_smart](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/64/pb/how_we_are_smart)

### Also by W. Nikola-Lisa

***America: A Book of Opposites/Un libro de contrarios***

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/174/bb/america\\_a\\_book\\_of\\_opposites](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/174/bb/america_a_book_of_opposites)

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***Summer Sun Risin'***

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/114/pb/summer\\_sun\\_risin](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/114/pb/summer_sun_risin)

***El sol del verano (Summer Sun Risin' in Spanish)***

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**BookTalk with W. Nikola-Lisa on *My Teacher Can Teach . . . Anyone!*:**

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/nikola.mhtml>

**Article by W. Nikola-Lisa on *My Teacher Can Teach . . . Anyone!*:**

<http://www.leeandlow.com/images/pdfs/nikola.pdf>

### Order Information

#### On the Web:

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