



**Classroom Guide for  
THE EAST-WEST HOUSE:  
NOGUCHI'S CHILDHOOD IN  
JAPAN**

Written & illustrated by  
**Christy Hale**

**Reading Level**

\*Reading Level: Grades 3-4  
Interest Level: Grades 2-8  
Guided Reading Level: Q  
Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.2/.5  
Lexile™ Measure: AD760

\*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

**Themes**

Art, Artistic Beginnings, Biography, Family, Biracial Children, Racial Prejudice/Discrimination, Asian/Asian American Interest

**Synopsis**

Born to a Scotch-Irish American mother and a Japanese father, Isamu felt he was living in two worlds regardless of where he was. Although he was born in the United States, his mother moved with Isamu to Japan to be near his father. It was soon found out that his father had another family in Japan and Isamu and his mother would no longer live with him. They chose to stay in Japan, but were treated as foreigners.

Young Isamu, with his combination of Eastern and Western looks, always felt like an outsider. He was bullied in school for being different. But Isamu found pleasure in the natural world. Color, light, textures, and shadows intrigued him. Playing with earth, wood, and clay brought out his artistic talents. When his mother bought a small piece of land on which to build a house, Isamu, at eight years old, drew plans for the home. He designed it to be a mix of both Eastern and Western styles and later added decorative touches he carved from wood. His work on this house, called the "East-West House" marked the beginning of Isamu's lifelong creative journey.

## BACKGROUND

In 1901, Japanese poet Yonejiro Noguchi arrived in New York. Although he had published two books of poetry in English, Yone was still unsure of the language. He advertised for assistance and hired Leonie Gilmour as editor and teacher. The two worked well together, and soon a romance developed. Yone declared his love for Leone and promised they would marry. But in the spring of 1904, Yone suddenly returned to Japan even though Leonie was expecting their child.

Yone realized he still needed Leonie's help with his English works, and he tried to convince her to come to Japan. Leonie refused at first but finally decided to go. She feared that growing anti-Japanese sentiment in the United States would affect her biracial child. So in March 1907, Leonie and her two-year-old son journeyed from Los Angeles to Tokyo, Japan.

Isamu grew up to be the multifaceted artist Isamu Noguchi. Guided by his desire to enrich everyday life with art while bringing together Eastern and Western influences, Noguchi created a vast array of innovative sculptures, stage sets, furniture, and public spaces. *The East-West House* is a tribute to the artistic beginnings of this pioneering modern sculptor and designer.

The last three pages of the book contain more detailed information about Isamu Noguchi's boyhood, his artistic development, and his legacy, along with photographs of the artist and some of his most influential works from around the world. Additional information can also be found online, especially at the [Noguchi Museum](#) site.

### Teaching Tip

You may wish to include *The East-West House* on your reading table during May, which is celebrated as Asian Pacific American Heritage Month.

## 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. Have you ever heard of the country of Japan? Let's find it on a map of the world (or a globe). What city is the capital of Japan? What else do you know about Japan?
2. What is your favorite kind of art project to work on? What do you like to make? Why do you enjoy that kind of project?
3. Who are some artists we know about from the books we've read? What do you like about the work they create?

### Exploring the Book

Write the title and subtitle of the book on the chalkboard. Ask students what they think an "east-west" house might be. Then read the subtitle

and help students identify the boy in the illustration as Noguchi. Discuss the boy and his apparent interest in the house in the background of the illustration.

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: title page, Copyright page with dedication and pronunciation guide, introduction, and backmatter with detailed information, photographs, and sources.

### Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to:

- find out what an east-west house is,
- learn about Isamu's childhood and how it impacted him as an artist, and
- consider how they might have reacted in a similar situation as Isamu.

### VOCABULARY

The story contains some words that may be unfamiliar to students as well as familiar words that may be used in unfamiliar ways. Have students discuss the following words and look up any they do not know. Then have students write a sentence for each word that illustrates its meaning.

countless	courageous	harbor	bamboo	barren
shunned	current	shift	mirrored	course
kaleidoscope	steered	molded	wedge	sloping
distinctive	apprenticed	sculpted	nestled	ancient
swelled	soared			

### 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.

<b>Literal Comprehension</b>
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1. Who is Isamu? Where was he born?
2. Who was Isamu's father? Who was his mother?
3. Where did Isamu grow up?
4. Why did Isamu's father leave him and his mother alone in Japan?
5. What kinds of things did Isamu like to do?
6. What happened to Isamu in school?
7. How did Isamu help build the house in Japan? Name three things he did.
8. What kind of apprentice was Isamu? What did he learn as an apprentice?
9. What kinds of stories did Isamu's mother read to him?

10. What do you think the last line of the story means? ("Isamu created home.") What kind of home did he create? How can you tell?

<b>Extension/Higher Level Thinking</b>
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1. What did you notice about the illustrations in this book? What kind of feeling or mood do they create for the story?
2. Why were Isamu and his mother called *gaijin*, foreigners? How do you think this made them feel?
3. What do you think it was like for Isamu growing up in Japan? Do you think Isamu learned any lessons that helped him later in life? What did he learn and how did it help him?
4. Where did Isamu find his joy even though he was lonely? Why do you think he was so interested in nature and art?
5. The house Isamu helped design is described as "Half Eastern, half Western, . . . a mixture like his own." What does this mean?
6. What ideas and feelings do you think inspired Isamu when he was helping to work on the house?
7. Why is the "East-West" house a good name for the house?
8. How do you think Isamu felt about the house he helped build? Find places in the text and images that helped you decide.
9. What kind of artist did Isamu grow up to be? What kinds of things did he create?

### 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 the passages that capture moments in Isamu's life that helped shape his work as an artist.
- The **Illustrator** might create an illustration of one of Isamu's works of art from the back of the book or from further research.
- The **Connector** might find information about one or more other artists and childhood experiences that influenced their later work.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might find more information about why there was anti-Japanese sentiment in the US during the early 1900s.

\*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 and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work, if they wish to.

1. How did this story make you feel? Were you sad or happy for Isamu? Or both? Why?
2. How would you feel if you had to move to a different country where you didn't speak the language? What would you do to make yourself feel more at home?
3. What are the most positive parts of the story? What are the least positive? Why do you think so?
4. Do you think Isamu and his mother were close? What makes you think so?
5. How do you think Isamu felt about his work on the "east-west" house? How did working on the house encourage him? Help him fit in? How did he feel about the house at the end of the story?
6. Have you ever been in some of the situations Isamu experienced? How did you handle them? What did you learn? Did they affect things you did later on? Write a short passage about your experiences.
7. Have students write a book recommendation for this story explaining why they would or would not recommend this book to other students.

### **ELL Teaching Activities**

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners.

1. Assign ELL students to read the story aloud with strong English readers/speakers.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
  - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.
  - Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about what they admire about a character or central figure in the story.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES**

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

### **Social Studies**

On a map or globe, have students pinpoint all the places where Isamu Noguchi lived. In the back of the book there is more information about where he went to school and where he lived as an adult. Have students pick one of the cities and research that place so they can create a travel guide for a tourist. Students should include information such as where to shop, eat, or experience art. Students may also wish to create a map of the area and a write up of interesting historical facts. Old travel brochures would be helpful in giving students ideas about how to present their information.

### **Math**

When creating a plan for a house or building, engineers and architects must create a scaled version of the area and building. Teach students how to create a scale, then, using measuring tape or a yardstick to measure, have them create a scaled diagram of a room in the school or a room in their home. Alternatively, students might enjoy designing and building, to scale, a house the way young Isamu did.

### **Science**

Isamu Noguchi was inspired by the forms, colors, and materials of nature. Using the photographs of Noguchi's works in the back of the book, or other photos of his works (there are many on the [Noguchi Museum website](#)), have students discuss each structure or item to see if they can find reflections of nature or something that reminds them of the natural world. Interested students could note their observations and thoughts below pictures of the items discussed.

### **Language Arts**

Christy Hale uses lyrical text to tell Isamu's story. Explore this way of writing further with students and either as a class, in small groups, or individually (depending on students' grasp of the style) have students write a few stanzas of their own to describe a moment from their childhoods.

### **Art**

1. Let each student look at pictures of Noguchi's works and pick a favorite piece. After reading a few art reviews, have students write their own reviews of the pieces they chose.
2. Author/illustrator Christy Hale has several art project ideas relating to the book on her website. Activities include designing a house, making a kimono, designing a landscape collage, designing a Japanese garden, and making a Noguchi style table. You can find easy-to-follow instructions and patterns for students [here](#).

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR**

**Christy Hale** is the author and illustrator of *The East-West House: Noguchi's Childhood in Japan*, a *Kirkus Reviews* Best Books of the Year selection and *Dreaming Up: A Celebration of Building*, a *Horn Book Magazine* Fanfare title. She has also illustrated several award-winning picture books, including *Elizabeth's Doll* and its two sequels. As an art educator, Hale has written about artists for *Instructor*

magazine's Masterpiece of the Month feature and workshops. Hale lives with her family in Palo Alto, California. Visit her online at [christyhale.com](http://christyhale.com).

### **Resources on the Web**

Learn more about *The East-West House: Noguchi's Childhood in Japan* at: [http://www.leeandlow.com/books/373/hc/the\\_east\\_west\\_house\\_noguchi\\_s\\_childhood\\_in\\_japan](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/373/hc/the_east_west_house_noguchi_s_childhood_in_japan)

### **Book Information**

\$17.95, Hardcover

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Interest Level: Grades 2-8

Reading Level: Grades 3-4

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.2/.5

Guided Reading Level: Q

### **Order Information**

#### **On the Web:**

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/ordering.mhtml> (general order information)

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/373/hc/the\\_east\\_west\\_house\\_noguchi\\_s\\_childhood\\_in\\_japan](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/373/hc/the_east_west_house_noguchi_s_childhood_in_japan)

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