



## Speculation

written by Nisi Shawl

### About the Book

**Genre:** Middle Grade Fantasy

**Format:** Hardcover  
240 pages, 5 x 7-1/2

**ISBN:** 9781620149591

**Reading Level:** Grade 5

**Interest Level:** Grades 4–8

**Guided Reading Level:** Y

**Accelerated Reader® Level/Points:**  
N/A

**Lexile™ Measure:** N/A

\*Reading level based on the ATOS Readability Formula

**Themes:** Courage, Discrimination, Diversity, Families, Fantasy, Fiction, History, Identity/Self Esteem/Confidence, Middle Grade, Mystery, Overcoming Obstacles, Paranormal, Persistence/Grit, Slavery, United States History

**Resources on the web:**

[leeandlow.com/books/speculation](http://leeandlow.com/books/speculation)

All guided reading level placements may vary and are subject to revision. Teachers may adjust the assigned levels in accordance with their own evaluations.

### SYNOPSIS

***A wonderful middle-grade fantasy debut about Black families, family history, family curses . . . and a really marvelous pair of spectacles.***

After Winna's little sister breaks her glasses, her grandfather gives her an old-timey pair of spectacles that belonged to her great-aunt Estelle. The specs are silver and perfectly circular, with tiny stars on the bridge and earpieces that curl all the way around her ears.

Best of all, *they're magic.*

Because when Winna makes a wish beginning with the words "What if"—that is, when she speculates—the spectacles grant it. Winna wishes she could see ghosts . . . and soon she meets not only the real Estelle, but Estelle's mother, Winona. Nearly a century before, Winona escaped from slavery and ran north with her baby, Key. But Key was stolen from her under mysterious circumstances, and now Estelle and Winona have a mission for Winna: *Find Key.*

He's still alive. He doesn't know the whole truth. And unless Winna can solve the mystery and bring him home, a powerful curse called the Burden will smother out their family's lives—and Winna's mom could be its next victim.

This beautifully written historical fantasy by an award-winning science fiction author offers new twists and turns in every chapter and will leave you looking at your own family's roots with new eyes.

## BACKGROUND

### Author's Note on Where This Book Happens from Nisi Shawl

Kalamazoo, Michigan, is where I was born, in 1955, a long, long time ago. Before that, my father's family lived in Vandalia and the nearby town of Cassopolis. My mother's family lived close to Paw Paw, in a little village of only 150 people, and my grandmother and grandfather are buried in Covey Hill Cemetery.

But in real life, none of these places are exactly the way I describe them in *Speculation*. If you look them up, you'll see that they're not even in the same spots on the map where I put them in what I've written.

Here's what I want this book to do: I want it to make you feel like you're in this imaginary world that I've created based on how the friends and relatives I grew up with thought and talked and acted, on where they slept and worked and fought and played. If it's doing that, good. Don't worry about matching its locations up mile-for-mile with real ones with the same names. Just be glad that you've redeemed my dear old dreams and found a beautiful new home for your own.

### Black Family History & Genealogy

"Slavery and the Family Tree" from African American Historical Intellectual History Society (<https://www.aaihs.org/slavery-and-the-family-tree/>) and Pew Research Center's "Black Americans: Family history, slavery, and knowledge of Black history" (<https://www.pewresearch.org/race-ethnicity/2022/04/14/black-americans-family-history-slavery-and-knowledge-of-black-history/>) are two resources that provide more insight into the complexities behind Black families finding genealogy through complicated records and family history through enslaved ancestors. The Library of Congress and PBS also have African American Genealogy Resources (<https://guides.loc.gov/african-american-family-histories/subjects>) (<https://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/technique/african-american-genealogy/>) for more information.

### The Civil War

PBS has organized a list of resources from the Library of Congress that offer online collections featuring maps, photographs, speeches, and other primary source documents from the Civil War. Additionally, there are lesson plans and primary source sets for further information and Civil War exploration in the classroom (<https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/kenburnsclassroom/film/the-civil-war/>).

The Zinn Education Project also offers a list of free resources, lesson plans, and activities to use with students when teaching about the Civil War. Lesson plans range from election role play, walking tours with maps, and other handouts that contain primary source documents for students to examine (<https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/who-freed-the-slaves/>).

## Slavery

Consult Learning for Justice's "Tongue-Tied" guide (<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2014/tonguetied>) and "Teaching Hard History: A Framework for Teaching American Slavery" (<https://www.learningforjustice.org/frameworks/teaching-hard-history/american-slavery/k-5-framework/introduction>) for terminology, key concepts, objectives, and appropriate timelines for teaching about slavery correctly, honestly, and accurately.

## BEFORE READING

### Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

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

- What does it mean to be resilient? How do you demonstrate resilience even though something may be challenging? Why is it important to be resilient? Do you think it can be learned? How so?
- Why might someone need to leave their home? What are different factors that play into people leaving their homes unexpectedly?
- Have you ever solved a problem? What did you do? Why did you have to solve that particular problem? How did you think quickly? How were you acknowledged afterward?
- What does it mean to be brave? Think about a time when you had to be brave. What did you do? How did you feel?
- How does storytelling help you learn about the world? What ways can storytelling be useful to learn about family histories and the past? Why is it important to learn about family history?
- How do you expect to be treated by others? How do you feel if people don't treat you well? Have you ever witnessed someone being mistreated? What emotions emerge?
- Ask students to think about their family and what family means to them. How is family important to you? How do you interact with your family members? How do you help them? What about siblings, if any? How do you help your siblings, and vice versa?
- What does it mean to stand up for what you believe is right? What are some instances in history where people stood up for what they believed in even though they encountered adversity and opposition?
- What do you know about the history of slavery in the United States? What have you learned about slavery from books that you've read or what you've heard before in school? What do you know about the origins of the institution of slavery in the United States? How did the institution of slavery impact the country socially, politically, and economically when it was legal? How/why did slavery end? Does the legacy of slavery continue to have an impact today? If so,

how? Note: Please be cognizant of the language. Remember that slavery is not who a person is, it was what was forced upon them. Referring to people as “slaves” removes the person/humanity from them—it effectively dehumanizes them. It is important to use “enslaved person” instead of referring to people as slaves.

### Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1; Craft & Structure, Strand 5; and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)  
(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

- Book title exploration: Talk about the title of the book, *Speculation*. Then ask students what they think this book will most likely be about and whom the book might be about. What do they think might happen? What information do they think they might learn? What makes them think that?
- Read Nisi Shawl's biography: Read about Nisi Shawl on the jacket back flap. Encourage students to think about what could have been their inspiration for writing *Speculation*. Visit Nisi Shawl's website to learn more about their work: <http://www.nisishawl.com/>.
- Encourage students to stop and jot in their reading notebooks during the read-aloud when they: learn new information, see a powerful image, have an emotional reaction or an idea, have a question, or hear new words.
- Have students quickly write a feeling in their notebooks during reading. After reading, ask students why they wrote down that feeling and have them write a journal entry about it.

### Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

Have students read to find out:

- the ways storytelling can be powerful and influential in learning about family histories
- why Winna and her sister had to leave their home temporarily, and what happened to their mother
- how Winna changes and develops throughout the story as she learns about her family and their history
- what Winna's family's Burden is and how she has to help resolve it
- the ways magic is woven into the story and how it influences the characters and their development
- how and why generational trauma can affect people differently
- what racism and discrimination Winna experiences during the story and why
- how Winna is treated by white people in her community because of her race
- why it's important to learn about slavery through the lens of enslaved people

Encourage students to consider why the author, Nisi Shawl, would want to share Winna's powerful story with young people.

## VOCABULARY

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 4)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below.

Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word. (Many of the Spanish words can be found in the book glossary, but there are also some that are not included. Students could be encouraged to create a log of these words—they will not be listed here.)

### Content Specific

lilacs, The Time Garden, Edward Eager, runic, cannibals, Kalamazoo, Pharaoh, Moses, bronchitis, Vandalia, bootnoses, Covey Hill, Civil War, Garland, Tennessee, Jupiter, Saturn, skinning, tanning, consumption, Tuberculosis, Andy Griffith Show, Paw Paw, North Glade, Lily-livers, calamine lotion, Ray Charles, Intensive Care, Sherlock Holmes, Robin Hood, windfall, inheritance

### Academic

privacy, accusingly, doubted, stumbling, whimper, *Speculation*, sermon, condensation, persuaded, layovers, meddlers, cemetery, semaphores, tombstone, arithmetic, slavery, plantation, overseas, slanting, telescope, kaleidoscope, vibrated, pouting, unaffected, swans, refrained, shuddered, oath, bound, interrupting, locomotive, wobbly, obediently, scruples, waxily, donned, sensible, lingered, hoodlums, slum, consequences, fidgeted, suffice, partiality, genealogy, investigation, acquaintance, superstition, buggy, settlement, stunning, stupendous, observation, reservoir, articulate, piffle, prejudiced, perpetrator, dubious, stabilize, hoodoo, abandoned, trespassing, unwavering, exaggerated, harrumphing

\*Please note that a derogatory term and slur is used in the book, Black Sambo tarbaby. Be cognizant of students' needs and preparation prior to engaging with this term. For more resources on how to address this term in the classroom, see the following resources: Facing History & Ourselves "Addressing Racist and Dehumanising Language" (<https://www.facinghistory.org/en-gb/resource-library/addressing-racist-dehumanising-language>), ADL's Responding to Bias Incidents in Middle & High Schools ([https://www.noplaceforhate.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Responding%20to%20Bias%20Incidents%20Guide\\_030321.pdf](https://www.noplaceforhate.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Responding%20to%20Bias%20Incidents%20Guide_030321.pdf)), and Learning for Justice's "Responding to Hate and Bias at School" ([https://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/general/Responding%20to%20Hate%20at%20School%20ONLINE\\_3.pdf](https://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/general/Responding%20to%20Hate%20at%20School%20ONLINE_3.pdf)).

## 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/or illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite textual evidence with their answers.**

### Literal Comprehension

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

#### Chapters 1-6

1. Where do Winna and her sister, Tupelo, have to go? Who do they live with temporarily?
2. Where is Winna and Tupelo's mother?
3. What does Winna learn about her family from Grampa Carl? Where does he take Winna and Tupelo?
4. What is the Burden?
5. Who are Winona Gonder Cole and Key Cole? What happened to them?
6. What happens to Winna's glasses? What does she replace them with?
7. What does Winna see in her new spectacles? Who is Estelle, and what does she tell Winna?
8. Who is Benny? How does he play a role in Winna's life?

#### Chapters 7-13

9. What does Benny make Winna realize about Key's story?
10. What does Winna continue to learn about Key? How does this affect her journey to find him?
11. Who bullies Winna? What do they call her? How does she react?
12. What does Winna learn from Grampa Carl's own story? What does he tell her about the Burden?
13. What is the Rule of Two? What does Winna realize about the power of the spectacles?
14. How does Winna become more strategic with what she asks the spectacles to show her?
15. What happens to the spectacles after Benny puts them on?

#### Chapters 14-20

16. Who is Miss Ross? How does she help Winna in her quest to find Key?
17. What does Miss Ross help Winna do?
18. Who responded to Winna's letter?
19. What happens to Winna's mother in Intensive Care? What does Winna think she needs to do?

20. Who are Miss Tooma and Mrs. Tate? How do they treat Winna and Benny? Who else do Winna and Benny see at Miss Tooma and Mrs. Tate's house?
21. Who does Winna see in Mrs. Tate's book?
22. What do Benny and Winna find out about their genealogy at Mrs. Tate's house?
23. What does Estelle tell Winna about the Burden? What does Winna have to do next?
24. Who comes to Grampa Carl's celebration? What do they reveal to the family?
25. What happens to the Burden at the end of the story? What about Winna and Tupelo's mother?

### Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4 and 6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. What does the title *Speculation* mean to you after reading the book? Why do you think the author chose this particular title?
2. Explore the structure of this text. Does the story describe events chronologically, as comparison, cause and effect, or problems and solutions? Why do you think the author structured the text the way they did? How does this story compare to other texts you have read?
3. How does magic play a role in *Speculation*? What are some of the ways that magic is woven into the story? How does magic help Winna? How does it frustrate her? How does she take advantage of magic during the book?
4. How do Grampa Carl's family stories play a role in Winna's quest to resolve the Burden in the story? What does he continue to reveal to her over the course of the book? What are some of the family histories that she learns about? How do they affect her, and how do they influence her character's development and change?
5. What is Tupelo like? How does Winna have to take care of Tupelo during the story? What do you think Tupelo represents? What kind of relationship do Winna and Tupelo have?
6. Who is Benny and what kind of relationship does Winna have with him? How does Benny and Winna's relationship change during the story? How does Benny help Winna?
7. How do ghosts play a role in the story? What are the different scenarios where Winna sees the ghosts? How do the ghosts inspire Winna? How do they frustrate her? What do you think the ghosts symbolize?
8. How does Estelle and Winna's communication change during the story? How does Winna communicate with Estelle in the beginning? What does she learn about Estelle and how does that influence what Winna continues to ask Estelle? What does Estelle reveal to Winna during the book?
9. Why do you think Estelle speaks in rhyme through the spectacles? How does this influence what Winna understands about what Estelle asks her to do? Why do you think Nisi Shawl chose to write Estelle's character's dialogue in this way? Why do you think they made their

dialogue with Winna separate from the text of the story?

- 10.** What does Winna learn about “The Rule of Two?” What does she realize “The Rule of Two” is by the end of the book? How does “The Rule of Two” help her solve the Burden?
- 11.** What is Winna’s relationship like with her father? If her mother’s health doesn’t improve, where do Winna and Tupelo have to go during the summer? How does it make Winna feel?
- 12.** What kinds of racism and discrimination does Winna experience in *Speculation*? What kinds of things do people in her community say to her? How does she respond and react? How do you think times have changed, or not changed, since the time that *Speculation* takes place in the 1960s?
- 13.** How does Grampa Carl respond to Winna’s question, “Do colored people ever have white babies?” What does Winna discover about Key that inspires her to ask this question to Grampa Carl? How does he react? What does Winna continue to learn about her family history?
- 14.** Unpack Winna’s question, “Do people ever make promises that turn out the wrong way for them?” How does Grampa Carl react? What does Winna continue to learn about this question, and how do you think she would answer it by the end of the story?
- 15.** Why do you think Benny removed the power of magic from the glasses? How does Winna problem solve and figure out how to move forward without the magic from Estelle’s spectacles?
- 16.** What does Winna really want from the magic of the spectacles? Why does she go on the quest to find Key and relieve the Burden in the first place? How does this motivation fuel her throughout the story?
- 17.** Mrs. Tate tells Winna, “What a surprise! Despite that piece in the newsletter, I had the distinct impression over the telephone—I told my sons that they must be mistaken when they said you were a—You’re so articulate! Such a good vocabulary!” How does Winna respond? How does this demonstrate racism and prejudice? How does this make Winna feel? For more information about teaching about microaggressions, see the activity in the English/Language Arts section of this guide.
- 18.** What do Winna and Benny realize about Mrs. Tate and her sons? How are they treated at Mrs. Tate’s home? What is Mrs. Tate like as a person? How does she treat other people, including her own sons?
- 19.** What happens at the family reunion and Grampa Carl’s party? Who arrives and how does this make the family feel? How do Estelle and Winona respond to Key arriving? How is the Burden ultimately lifted?



### Reader's Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)

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 response journals, essays, or oral discussion.** You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. What is one big thought you have after reading this book? Think about how Winna navigates and experiences her family history as well as trauma throughout *Speculation*. How does she process trauma and change during the story? Moving forward, how does this change her?
2. What do you think is Nisi Shawl's message to the reader? Think about possible motivations behind Nisi Shawl's intentions for writing the book. What do you think they wanted to tell their readers?
3. Have students make a text-to-self connection. What kinds of connections did you make from this book to your own life? What do Winna's experiences, thoughts, and feelings mean to you?
4. Have students make a text-to-text connection. Did you think of any other books while you read *Speculation*? Why did you make those connections?
5. Have students make a text-to-world connection. What kind of connections did you make between this book and what you have seen in the world, such as online, on television, or in a newspaper? Why did this book make you think of that?
6. What does family history mean to you after reading? After reading *Speculation*, how did it make you think differently about family histories and learning about the past? How can learning about the past help inform our present realities and help others? Why is it important to learn from older family members or others in our community?
7. Have students write a book review after reading *Speculation*. Consult ReadWriteThink's lesson plan on how to teach students how to write book reviews (<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/what-think-writing-review-876.html>). Students can also refer to other book reviews for references. What did they enjoy about *Speculation*? What would they tell a friend or another person who wants to read the book? Students can share their book reviews with small groups or the whole class.

### ELL Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader.
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: 1) Review several chapters and have students summarize what happened, first orally, and then in writing.

- 2) Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about what they learned from *Speculation*.
  5. The book contains several content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

### Social and Emotional Learning

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1-3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4-6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4-6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 6)

Social and emotional learning involves being aware of and regulating emotions for healthy development. In addition to understanding one's own feelings, strong socio-emotional development allows individuals to develop empathy for others and to establish and maintain relationships.

Use the following prompts to help students study the socio-emotional aspects of this book.

1. How does Winna demonstrate persistence and resilience throughout *Speculation*? Winna experiences many setbacks in her quest to relieve the Burden throughout the story. Identify a scene from the story that exemplifies how Winna is resilient. What made you choose this particular passage? How did it affect you and what did you learn from Winna after reading *Speculation*?
2. What kinds of emotions does Winna have while her mother is in the hospital? How does she feel about living in Aunt Pic's house and going back and forth between Aunt Pic and her grandparents' home? What are some of the feelings that she experiences? Using evidence from the book, discuss how Winna experiences complex feelings during her mother's hospital stay.
3. What are the coping strategies and techniques that Winna uses while her mother is in the hospital? How does she combat her negative thoughts and feelings to keep going? How do her coping techniques change? How does she remain positive?
4. How does the trauma of Key's disappearance affect Winna and her family members differently? How do they each cope with the aftermath of his disappearance and ultimate kidnapping? How does Key represent family generational trauma, especially during and after slavery?
5. Many historians, scholars, and mental health experts (including the American Psychological Association [https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/02/ legacy-trauma](https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/02/legacy-trauma)) talk about how generational trauma can affect survivors' and their descendants' mental and physical health

for generations. What is generational trauma and what impact could it have on individuals who are part of communities who have experienced trauma, genocide, displacement, incarceration, or racial violence?

6. Racism results in the mistreatment and isolation of people based on their race and the color of their skin. Have you or someone you know ever been treated differently based on race or the color of one's skin? How did you feel experiencing this or witnessing it? How did you react? What can we do to confront this kind of discrimination?
7. Winna experienced racism and prejudice because of her race during the story. How do you respond to racism or discrimination, when you experience it yourself and/or when you see it happening to others?
8. What are the ways that Winna demonstrates determination throughout the story? Note specific instances where Winna is determined in her mission and goal.
9. What does Grampa Carl teach Winna throughout the story? How does Grampa Carl influence Winna's character and what does she learn about herself through Grampa Carl and his family histories? What does Grampa Carl reveal to readers about why it's important to listen to elders in our families and communities?
10. Encourage students to identify passages where characters manage and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways. In a chart with five columns, write: What was the cause of the conflict? What was the consequence of the conflict? How does the character(s) resolve the problem? What are additional ways the character(s) could have solved the problem? What advice would you give?
11. Choose an emotion that interests you: happiness, sadness, fear, anxiety, frustration, hope, perseverance, and so on. Illustrate or act out what that emotion looks like in *Speculation*.

## INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Students who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

### English/Language Arts

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **One of the last sentences in *Speculation* is “Because she hadn’t given up.”** How does this encapsulate Winna’s determination and quest throughout the story? What are the ways that Winna is determined to achieve her goals throughout the book? Provide examples and details of ways that Winna doesn’t give up, and why. Students can use a graphic organizer to outline their thoughts about Winna’s different goals and how she achieves them, and then prepare an analytical essay to unpack this concluding statement in *Speculation*.
- **Encourage students to think about the role of magic in *Speculation* and how it influences the story.** What are some of the ways that magic is used in the book? How does it help Winna? How does it sometimes hinder her goal? How does magic influence Winna’s character development and change her during the story? Have students outline specific instances of the ways that magic influences Winna’s character and prepare a critical essay detailing how magic is critical to the story.
- **Have students highlight one of Grampa Carl’s stories and write about what they learned from this family history.** Why do you think author Nisi Shawl chose to weave family histories throughout the history? How does Nisi Shawl differentiate the family histories between the actual narrative and Winna’s story? How does this influence the progression of the book? In an essay, students can discuss why they selected this particular excerpt of family history and how it added to Winna’s growing knowledge of her family ancestry and genealogy.
- **Examine the different literary elements that author Nisi Shawl uses throughout *Speculation*.** Have students come up with a list and select portions of the text that showcase a specific literary device (i.e. foreshadowing, flashback, metaphor, etc). Afterward, students can select one literary device and write about how that was impactful when reading *Speculation*. How do literary devices make the story engaging, and how do they contribute to the story overall? See PBS’s Literary Elements and Techniques video for more information about how to teach about literary devices (<https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/litel18-fig/literary-elements-and-techniques-figurative-language/>).
- **Have students come up with a list of questions to ask author Nisi Shawl.** What do students want to know about the process behind writing a children’s book? How did the author come up with the idea to write *Speculation*? How did they conduct their research on

genealogy, setting, and other aspects that were critical to the book's development? Consider contacting Nisi Shawl through their website to learn more about their work (<http://www.nisishawl.com/>).

- **Conduct a unit on letter writing.** Winna writes a letter asking people if they know of Key and to help her quest to find him. Reading Rockets' "Introduction to Letter Writing" (<https://www.readingrockets.org/article/introduction-letter-writing>) provides tips and suggestions on how to incorporate letter writing into your curriculum. During the unit, have students reflect on different intentions of letters. What are some purposes behind writing a letter? What was Winna's motive behind writing a letter, and how did Miss Ross help her? Afterward, have students write a letter to a loved one, whether it's a family member, friend, or another special person in their life. What do they want to tell them? What's the purpose of the letter? Readwritethink.org also has additional resources and lesson plans designed to teach students authentic letter writing (<https://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/mail-using-literature-promote>).
- **Encourage students to read Nisi Shawl's blog post "The Reality of Rural Blackness: A Guest Post by Nisi Shawl"** (<https://blog.leeandlow.com/2023/02/22/the-reality-of-rural-blackness-a-guest-post-by-nisi-shawl/>). Afterward, students can write about the following questions: How did rural Black life inspire Nisi to write *Speculation*? What places in the book are influenced by Nisi's own life experiences? What does Nisi hope *Speculation* will teach readers? To extend on students' thinking, students can read the Author's Note in the back of the book to further inform their thinking about how setting plays a critical role in *Speculation*.
- **Assign students different characters from *Speculation* and have them brainstorm about a guiding question: What and how can this character teach us?** Students can think about different characters to examine as a whole class and then break into smaller, specific character groups. Encourage students to think about how characters have made mistakes and also have done good things in the book, and ultimately what they learned from that character. Have students share out their findings: How is this character important to the book, and what lessons did they teach us over the course of the story? How did their actions develop the narrative, and why are they crucial to understanding the meaning of the book?
- **Have students identify a place in the story where Winna's character changes in *Speculation*.** Why do students think that was a point where Winna changed? How does Winna feel before the change, what causes the change, and then how does she feel and act after? Create a graphic organizer with a column on the left that says "Before," a column in the middle that says "During," and a column on the right that says "After." Afterward, have students write an essay using evidence from the text to support their findings about Winna's character change.
- **Envision a sequel to *Speculation* and have students title the second book.** What do they think it would be called? Then, students can write the first chapter to the second book. How does Winna stay in touch with her family and Grampa Carl? Does she continue to learn about her family history? What is her relationship like with Tupelo? How does she continue to stand up for what's right? Students can also create a cover for the book (for more details, see question 1 in the Art/Media section of this guide).

- **Conduct an audit of the fantasy collection in their classroom library.** Students can work in small groups to analyze the fantasy books in their classroom. Students can answer the following questions: in what time place does this story take place? Who is featured in this story? Whose story is being told? Whose voice is being heard? Who is being oppressed and who is the oppressor? Who is the author and what is their background? Afterward, students can reflect on their findings. What voices were being centered the most? What was it like to do this activity? How can students continue to diversify their classroom library, particularly the fantasy section? Consult the article "From 'Harry Potter' to 'Hunger Games,' here's why fantasy struggles to include Black girls" (<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/harry-potter-hunger-games-here-s-why-fantasy-struggles-include-ncna1020196>) to further inform students' thinking.
- **Pair *Speculation* along with the picture book *Going Back Home: An Artist Returns to the South*** (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/going-back-home>). In *Going Back Home*, the author Michele Wood returns to the South more than half a century after her family moved North to experience the land where her ancestors lived, struggled, and thrived. Michele learns about her enslaved ancestors' struggles to overcome hardship through family love and community. Have students answer the following questions: how are these two stories similar? How does the Michele Wood's quest in *Going Back Home* resemble Winna's own in *Speculation*? Why is it important to learn about family history and what enslaved people experienced before, during, and after the Civil War?

### Social Studies & Geography

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3; Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6; Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9; and Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3; Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6; Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9; and Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, and Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **Have students continue to learn about Kalamazoo, Michigan, and the influence of Black communities in this area in the United States.** Prior to this activity, students can read and complete the activity from the English/Language Arts section of this guide featuring Nisi Shawl's blog post on their upbringing in rural Michigan. Nisi writes, "This land is our land too. I refuse to go along with the idea that only white people can claim it" (<https://blog.leeandlow.com/2023/02/22/the-reality-of-rural-blackness-a-guest-post-by-nisi-shawl/>). How does the setting influence Winna and her family? How do white people treat them in their community? Students can unpack this statement in relation to their findings about Black communities in Kalamazoo, first by identifying Kalamazoo on a map. Students can consult different articles online to learn about Black communities in Kalamazoo, including excerpts from Western Michigan Universities' "Survival Strategies of Black Kalamazoos: Migration, Kinship Networks and Work in a Midwestern Village, 1860-1900" ([https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4955&context=masters\\_theses](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4955&context=masters_theses)). Kalamazoo's Public Library also has a section dedicated to Black History (<https://www.kpl.gov/category/local-history/kalamazoo-history/black-history/>).
- **Conduct a study on the complexities behind Black Americans learning about**

**their family history.** Be cognizant of students' background and needs prior to engaging with this activity. Winna uncovers her family history through Grampa Carl's stories and is on a quest to find her great-great-great grandmother's missing son. In the Background section of this guide, resources from the Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/race-ethnicity/2022/04/14/black-americans-family-history-slavery-and-knowledge-of-black-history/>) and the African American Intellectual Historical Society (<https://www.aaihs.org/slavery-and-the-family-tree/>) provide more information about Black family histories and genealogy. The Library of Congress and PBS also have African American genealogy resources (<https://guides.loc.gov/african-american-family-histories/subjects>) (<https://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/technique/african-american-genealogy/>) for more information. Have students answer the following guiding questions: what did they learn from these resources? How does slavery impact the fabric of American families and society?

- **Design a lesson or unit on the Civil War (1861–1865) and its effects on people of the United States.** PBS has organized a list of resources from the Library of Congress that offer online collections featuring maps, photographs, speeches, and other primary source documents from the Civil War. Additionally, there are lesson plans and primary source sets for further information and Civil War exploration in the classroom (<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/civil-war/classroom/resources-library-congress/>). The Zinn Education Project also offers a list of free resources, lesson plans, and activities to use with students on the Civil War. Lesson plans range from walking tours with maps to other handouts that contain primary source documents for students to examine (<https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/who-freed-the-slaves/>). Ask students to think about the following guiding question: How did the Civil War impact African American communities? In a graphic organizer, have students list the causes and effects of the Civil War on Americans overall and African Americans specifically.
- **Encourage students to research the Jim Crow era (1877–1960s) and its effects on people of the United States. How did Jim Crow affect Black communities?** How did it continue to detrimentally affect Black people even after the Jim Crow Era ended? In a graphic organizer, have students list the causes and effects of Jim Crow on Americans overall and African Americans specifically. Consult the Library of Congress "Teaching with Primary Sources: Jim Crow and Segregation" (<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/jim-crow-segregation/>), "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow" (<https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/education.html>), and "Realities of Life in the Jim Crow Era" (<https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/fyr12.socst.us.1950pres.lpreallif/realities-of-life-in-the-jim-crow-era/>).
- **Have students identify themes in *Speculation* and connect them to present-day issues.** Provide students with a graphic organizer that has "Themes in *Speculation*" in the left-hand column and "Present-day Issue" in the right-hand column. Explain to students that they need to list themes from *Speculation* and present-day issues that relate to that theme. Once the graphic organizer is complete, have students select one theme and one present-day issue and write an essay explaining the connection between the two in more detail. Why did they pick this theme to focus on, and what are the implications in our society today? Brainstorm with students how and why these two themes connect, and then have students write an essay about a different theme from their organizer.

### Art/Media

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3; Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6; Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9; and Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3; Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6; Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9; and Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, and Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **For the question about the sequel activity in the English/Language Arts section, have students draw a cover image for their follow-up to *Speculation*.** What kind of materials do they want to use for the cover? Encourage students to consider what they think will happen in the second book, and how that reflects the artwork for the cover. How can they use the current cover to inspire their work?
- **Analyze the cover art for *Speculation*.** Why do you think the illustrator portrayed Winna in this particular way? Is this what you envisioned during the story? How is magic shown on the cover? Have students write an essay about the ways that covers can influence how they perceive the characters in the book.
- **Have students go through relevant episodes of *Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates Jr. from PBS*.** Finding Your Roots lesson plans can be found at PBS.org (<https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/fyr/t/finding-your-roots-season-one/teacher-materials-fyr/>). Have students select specific episodes that relate to *Speculation*, and what they learn about this person's quest to find their family history.

### School-Home Connection

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7-9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1-3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4-6)

- **Have students interview a family member about something that they are passionate about and fought for.** Have students ask family members if they ever had to solve a problem and how determination helped to fuel their end goal. How did they feel? What inspired them to keep going? What were they working towards?
- **If possible, have students ask family members about a family history that they feel comfortable sharing.** Is there something that a family member wanted to share about their own family history? What kinds of family histories did they learn about as a child, and what do they want to continue sharing? What's important for students to learn about family histories? Be aware of students' backgrounds before having them engage with this activity and be sensitive to their needs.
- **Encourage students to share what they learned from reading *Speculation* with their families.** What did students enjoy about the book? What other books would they want to read that are like *Speculation*? What did students learn about family history and finding out Winna's family's past from the story?





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nisi Shawl** is a multiple-award-winning writer and editor. Their novel *Everfair* was nominated for the Nebula Award for Best Novel, and the short story collection *Filter House* won the James Tiptree Jr. Award. In 1997, they cofounded the Carl Brandon Society to help give people of color greater visibility in the science fiction and fantasy worlds, and their "Writing the Other" workshops and accompanying book (co-created with Cynthia Ward) have taught thousands of writers new ways of thinking about diversity and representation within fiction.

Nisi received the Kate Wilhelm Solstice Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America in 2019. *Speculation* is their first novel for young readers. Born near Kalamazoo, Michigan, Nisi now lives near Seattle. Find them online at [nisishawl.com](https://nisishawl.com) and on Twitter at @nisishawl.

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## REVIEWS

"Provides a new lens to explore histories that can haunt and help us." —*Kirkus Reviews*, **starred review**

"Starring an inquisitive, perceptive protagonist and a supportive cast of adult characters, this intergenerational story underlines themes of family history and inheritance alongside a meditation on ordinary wonders." —*Publishers Weekly*

"*Speculation* is an empathetic and intriguing fantasy novel about magical powers and human weaknesses." —*Foreword Reviews*

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