

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

JEANNE WALKER HARVEY

LOVEIS WISE

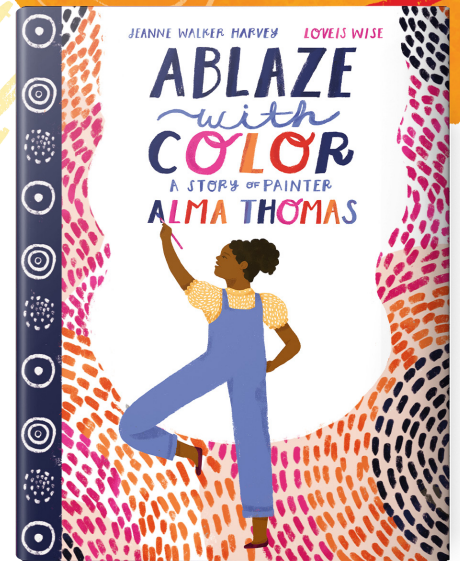
ABLAZE with COLOR

A STORY OF PAINTER
ALMA THOMAS



ABOUT THE BOOK

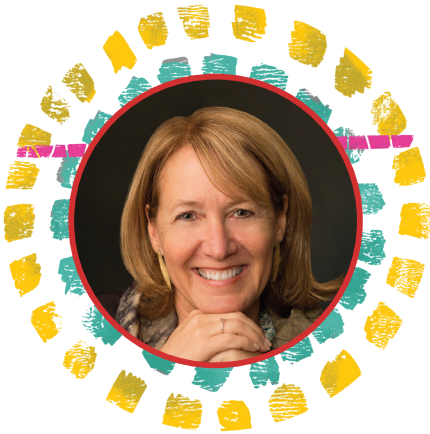
Author and museum docent **Jeanne Walker Harvey** partners with illustrator **Loveis Wise** to present the inspiring story of artist and art educator **Alma Thomas**. This beautiful biography showcases how Thomas, a Black woman, learned from her family and community and passed on the legacy of curiosity, creativity, and joy in spite of society's limitations. Over a long and productive life, Thomas brought art into the lives of children, then focused on her own art, which was featured in museums during her lifetime and in the White House decades after her passing.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeanne Walker Harvey has been a longtime docent at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Just like Alma Thomas, Jeanne believes that art brings us joy. Her other picture books include *Maya Lin: Artist-Architect of Light and Lines* and *My Hands Sing the Blues: Romare Bearden's Childhood Journey*. Jeanne studied literature and psychology at Stanford University. She lives in Northern California. Visit her online at www.jeanneharvey.com.

Photo by Mary Small Photography



ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Loveis Wise is a nonbinary illustrator and designer from Washington DC and currently finds home in Los Angeles. Loveis studied Fine Art & Illustration at The University of the Arts and has illustrated for the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, Google, and Target to name a few. They identify as an activist for radical dreaming and their work often speaks to themes of joy, mindfulness, and liberation.


Photo by David Banks and Kendrick Brinson





DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Take a long, careful look at the book's front cover. Look at the back cover, title page and end papers too. What ideas do these images give you? How do the colors, shapes, and patterns make you feel? What do you think the book will be about?
2. Alma's childhood wasn't perfect, but she found joy at home. What were some of the experiences that she enjoyed? How did those experiences in her childhood shape what she chose to do with her life?
3. When they moved to Washington, D.C., why did Alma's mother tell Alma and her sisters to "take off their shoes and shake out the Georgia sand. And never go back again." How do you think it felt for Alma to leave her old home behind for good?
4. What kind of work did Alma do with children in her neighborhood in Washington, D.C.? How did her work make a difference in her community?
5. How was Alma's work with children similar to what her parents did when Alma was young? How did Alma and her parents "make a way out of no way" to give Black children things they deserved but were denied? Have you seen creative solutions like this in your community?
6. Is it surprising that Alma developed her own art at the age of seventy? Why do you think being older may have allowed her to make more interesting artwork?
7. The book says Alma painted "how nature made her heart sing and dance, even when life could be unjust." Nature is healing for many people. Why do you think that is? Does nature make you happy? Is there something else that makes your heart "sing and dance"?
8. Alma painted things she imagined but had never experienced, like soaring in an airplane or traveling in space. Do you think it is difficult to express something you haven't seen?
9. Re-read the words of former President Barack Obama about the installation of Alma Thomas's painting at the White House. Why is it important that art by Black artists be displayed in a place that represents our country?


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10. How does the story of Alma Thomas's life show in many ways the story of the United States as a country?
 11. Why do you think so many people love Alma's artwork?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. **Design Your Cover.** Tell students they will be designing a cover for a book about a person they think the world should know about. Give them time to think of a person whose life and work they find important. The person does not have to be famous. Ask them to think of a title that represents the story of that person's life. Then provide art supplies and cardstock so students can design a book cover with their title and some images or designs that give readers an idea of what the person's passions are.
2. **Imagination Station.** Have students think about experiences they would like to have but haven't yet. Brainstorm together and write their ideas on the board or a wall. Tell them they are going to choose an experience, imagine what it might feel like, and paint or draw a picture of the feeling. Students can present their work to the class with an introduction, or they can guess what one another's paintings are about based on how they make the viewer feel.
3. **Warm Colors, Cool Colors.** Provide paints and brushes in a variety of colors, including primary colors and white. Explain the concept of "warm" colors (reds, yellows, oranges) and "cool" colors (blues, greens, purples). Encourage students to consider how these groups of colors make them feel, what kind of energy they impart. Ask them to create one warm painting and one cool painting, and then a painting that uses both kinds of colors. Afterward, discuss how the paintings feel.
4. **Timeline of Our Lives.** Show students the timeline of Alma's life alongside events in the United States. Discuss the societal changes Alma lived through. Ask students to brainstorm some major events in the country since their birth. Add to their list events they may not be aware of, such as technological advances and social movements. As a class, create a timeline with students on one side and major national and international events. On the students' side, include their birth year(s) and one or two major life events for each student. Students can predict how world events might affect their future interests.
5. **Portrait of Your Childhood.** Reread the first four spreads of the book to the class. Write some sentence starters on the board for students to use as a writing prompt to start a story of their own lives.

_____ always felt best when . . .
_____ liked to . . .
_____ made . . .

Have students write or draw a depiction of what kind of person they are right now and what activities they most enjoy. They can write in first person or in third person. Encourage them to keep this story opening someplace safe, so they can find it and add to it in the future.



TIPS FOR READING THIS BOOK WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

- Notice how Alma's freedom to pursue her joy and passion in childhood, despite the racist limitations that existed outside of her home, led to her ability to cope with hardships as an adult and to achieve great things. As much as possible, allow children time and opportunities to explore and develop what brings them joy. This self-knowledge can lead to self-actualization and can save lives.
- While it is always an honor to be the first of your kind to achieve something, it is also unfortunate that there are still barriers to be broken by Black women and other groups who have been excluded. Whenever you read or hear about a "first Black" anything, discuss with children why this is both something to be proud of and something that reflects how much farther we have to go to overcome racism in our society.
- Alma didn't live to see her painting in the White House, as many creative people don't live to see the lasting impact of their work. Help children conceive of a long-term view of success: that what you leave behind you in this world is a part of your life just as much as the success you enjoy while you are here.
- Recognize the influence of color and light on mood. Try to make learning and living spaces conducive to calm and peaceful feelings. Encourage children to decorate spaces with an eye for how colors make them feel.
- Discuss with children how Alma's observations of the world and memories of the things she absorbed as a child influenced her later success. When out in the world with children, encourage them to notice what is around them, whether it is natural or man-made. Explain that they will absorb their surroundings in a unique way and that they can express their perspective and share with others. Colors, shapes, lines, light, shadow, and sounds all can become material for later creativity.
- Use the sources at the back of the book to take virtual field trips or to explore Thomas's artwork online. Allow children to discover other artists too, and to become inspired by what draws them in.
- This story shows how the first Black president introduced the first painting by a Black female artist into the White House's permanent collection. Use this event as an example to discuss with children how having diversity at the level of leadership helps diversify the culture.
- This book explores a type of modern art and the inspiration that shaped it. Talk with children about the differences in artists' subjects. Art can represent the world, the artist, a community, a message, or feelings. When you encounter modern or abstract art, ask children to imagine what the artist may have been feeling when they created it. Ask them how it makes them feel.



Guide created by Autumn Allen. Autumn is an educator, a writer, and an editor specializing in children's literature. Find her online at autumnallenbooks.com.