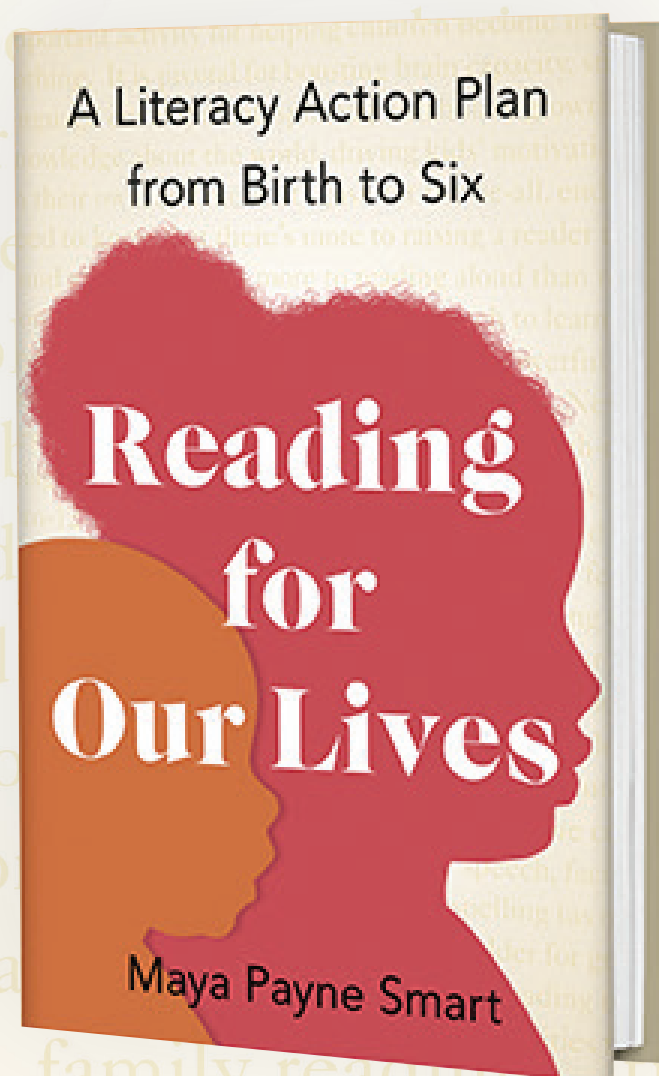


Reading for Our Lives

Book Discussion Guide



A Note from Maya

Reading is one of life's great solitary pleasures. Curled up alone in a chair, you can dive into a book's pages one by one, for as long as you like. And you get to decide whether the quiet immersion will be an escape from the day-to-day or a chance to engage more thoughtfully with everyday life through exposure to new ideas, information, and perspectives.

In writing *Reading for Our Lives*, I hoped that the book would prompt deep individual reflection within readers *and* also catalyze discussion—and action—among them. To help, I offer this guide to the book's key ideas, themes, and arguments, along with open-ended questions to ponder. May this exploration of the chapters' opening quotes, startling statistics, personal stories, historical insights, and practical recommendations spark memorable conversation.

Please let me know what you think! Email hello@mayasmart.com to let me know which questions and chapters gave you the most to think and talk about.

Stay Smart,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maya Payne Smart". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Maya" is the largest and most prominent, followed by "Payne" and "Smart". The signature is set against a light gray rectangular background.

Introduction: We Should All Be Readers

The book opens with an introduction to the reading crisis in the United States. It makes the case that parents should take an active role in their child's literacy journey, and details the tools they'll need. The reader also meets the author and learns about her personal reasons for delving into how to foster literacy at home.

THIS CHAPTER'S QUOTE

*The question is not whether we can afford to invest in every child;
it is whether we can afford not to.*
— Marian Wright Edelman

What does this quote mean? What is its relationship to this chapter? In what ways does it resonate or evoke a response in you?

Marian Wright Edelman founded the Children's Defense Fund, a decades-old organization that advocates for federal policies that improve children's lives. She was the first black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar and served various groundbreaking roles in government and scholarship throughout her life. She has earned more than one hundred honorary degrees and many awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award, and the Robert F. Kennedy Lifetime Achievement Award.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. In this chapter, the author shares statistics about adult and child literacy in the United States. What is your family's history with literacy?
2. What are your memories from learning to read? How was your reading experience in school? Did your parents play a role in your literacy development?
3. Do you see yourself in any of the quotes from parents in this chapter? In the author's thoughts and actions?
4. The author describes the journey towards literacy as a family road trip. What aspects of this journey do you feel more prepared for? What aspects do you feel less prepared for?
5. Why did you decide to read this book? What has interested you most in reading it?

Chapter 1: Beyond Bedtime Stories: The Truth about Getting Kids Ready to Read

Chapter 1 focuses on six “levers” parents can use to prepare their baby or child for literacy later on. One of those levers is reading aloud with your child—the tactic we hear about most often—but this is far from the only one available to parents. The other levers the chapter covers are conversation, teaching, connecting, budgeting, and advocacy.

THIS CHAPTER'S QUOTE

*Keep in mind always the present you are constructing.
It should be the future you want.
— Alice Walker*

What does this quote mean? What is its relationship to this chapter? In what ways does it resonate or evoke a response in you?

Alice Walker is a celebrated author of novels, short stories, poems, essays, and children's books. In her work, she explores issues and experiences related to race and gender equity, personal identity, and family relationships. She's also a civil rights activist, human rights activist, and womanist (a term coined by Walker for a black feminist who centers black experiences). Walker has earned the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the O. Henry Award, among other honors. The quote is from Walker's novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990).

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Chapter 1 opens by declaring that reading aloud to kids is not sufficient to lay the groundwork for literacy. Why do you think the author starts the chapter this way? What was your response to this section?
2. What role does reading aloud play in your home? Do you empathize more with the anxieties of the management-consultant mother or the bedtime-story mother?
3. The chapter's six levers range from the internal and family-focused (like parent-child conversation) to the external and outward-looking (like advocacy). Do you see yourself being more oriented toward the internal or external? Which of the six levers are you most comfortable with? Which would you like to learn more about? Do you notice yourself shying away from any?
4. Do you recall any adults in your life who taught you pre-literacy skills, aside from teachers? What and how did they teach you? Who in your community might be interesting resources to discuss your child's literacy with, such as daycare providers, librarians, doctors, or other parents?
5. Is the idea of tutoring for preschoolers new to you? Does it motivate you or give you pause? Why?

Chapter 2: The Long Run: How to Nurture Reading at Each Age and Stage

Chapter 2 describes language and literacy milestones and targets, with the purpose of helping parents understand how attention, book sharing, and conversation fuel their child's growth. Early timeframes roughly correspond to when most monolingual children have gained certain skills, while latter ones represent targets—when kids would benefit from having skills in order to meet grade level expectations, from early childhood through early elementary school. The author closes with a discussion on how to define literacy.

THIS CHAPTER'S QUOTE

There are years that ask questions and years that answer.
— Zora Neale Hurston

What does this quote mean? What is its relationship to this chapter? In what ways does it resonate or evoke a response in you?

Zora Neale Hurston was a groundbreaking author of fiction and nonfiction and a key artist of the 20th-century black intellectual-cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. She was also a trained anthropologist and folklorist, and these disciplines informed her writing, along with her own family history. Hugely influential among black artists and scholars of her era, Hurston became more widely recognized decades after her death, and a number of her works were published posthumously. The quote is from one of her best-known works, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Have you found that specific types of books attract your child most? For example, is/was your baby drawn to board books or cloth books, flaps or textures? Does your child prefer stories or informational nonfiction so far? Drawings or photos? Have these preferences surprised you?
2. In this chapter, we learn facts like that mouthing books is actually a literacy milestone, and that it's important to teach kids that English writing runs from left to right. Do any of the milestones or suggestions in the chapter surprise you? Why?
3. Which milestones strike you as most exciting, inspiring, or special? Do any of them strike you as challenging, confusing, or anxiety-inducing? Which future milestones are you most looking forward to?
4. The author muses that the definition of literacy changes with context, technology, and opportunity. Do you have any specialized literacy that others may not have (for example, medical or technical jargon, arts terminology, regional or cultural slang, or dialects)? What kinds of literacy do you think people may need in the future?
5. How would you define literacy? Has your answer to that question changed as a result of reading this chapter?

Chapter 3: Yes You Can: Five Touchstones for Parents Who Dare to Teach

Chapter 3 offers five simple teaching principles for parents. They're not about intensive drills and don't require a lot of knowledge, but rather are tips for infusing learning into everyday interactions. Ultimately, they're calls to be more patient, responsive, and purposeful in parenting.

The tenets are:

1. It's what you say—and how you say it
2. Learning takes time—and space
3. The more personal the lesson, the better
4. Praise the process
5. When in doubt, look it up

THIS CHAPTER'S QUOTE

Those who can, do. Those who understand, teach.
— Lee S. Shulman

What does this quote mean? What is its relationship to this chapter? In what ways does it resonate or evoke a response in you?

Lee Shulman is an American scholar and educator who has taught, written, and helmed important research initiatives related to teaching and teacher education. He has won numerous awards for his work in education and educational psychology and served as a former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. What feeling do you think the author sought to evoke with the title of this chapter? Is she challenging parents? Encouraging them? Galvanizing them? Something else? What was your initial reaction to the title? How do you feel now about it, having read the chapter?
2. The author states that the chapter's touchstones are "research-backed and parent-approved." Which of these two types of confirmation do you tend to put more stock in? Why?
3. Are any of the chapter's terms or concepts (for example, "spaced learning," "growth mindset") new to you? Are there any you find particularly intriguing or helpful? Any you find off-putting or overwhelming?
4. Do you see these six learning tenets applying to other populations, too (older children, adults, yourself)? Are there ways they apply specifically to young children? Which ones and how?
5. Which of the tenets do you find most exciting or inspiring? Which might present the biggest challenge for you?

Chapter 4: You're Hired: Essential Lessons Every Parent Can—and Should—Give Kids

Chapter 4 explores six pre-reading and early-reading subject areas—oral language, sound awareness, print awareness, letter knowledge, phonics, and spelling. It shares simple, loving ways parents can incorporate learning in each area into their children's daily lives.

THIS CHAPTER'S QUOTE

Whatever the intellectual quality of the education given our children, it is vital that it include elements of love and compassion, for nothing guarantees that knowledge alone will be truly useful to human beings.

— His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama

What does this quote mean? What is its relationship to this chapter? In what ways does it resonate or evoke a response in you?

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama is the spiritual and former political leader-in-exile of the Tibetan people. Identified at age two for this role, he came of age just as newly-communist China invaded Tibet, and he fled to India in 1959. Since that time, he's worked in exile to support Tibetan refugees, preserve Tibetan identity and culture, raise awareness about Buddhism, and advocate for Tibetan independence on an international stage. The Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 and the Templeton Prize in 2012.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. The author shares two anecdotes in this chapter. One tells the story of Mary Walker, who was born into slavery and learned to read at 116. The second introduces a literacy coach who finds she must teach basic reading to high-schoolers. How are these stories relevant to the book's readers? What lines might the author be drawing between these two women's experiences?
2. Which of the subject areas this chapter touches on are you most curious to learn more about? Which do you least look forward to delving into? Why?
3. What's your biggest takeaway from this chapter? Did any of the information surprise you? After reading this chapter, what do you think could most help you support your child's literacy?
4. What was your reaction to the information on "conversational turns"? Does conversing with a baby or young child come naturally to you? Or does it feel forced? What do you think are the obstacles to babies and young kids getting the responsive talk their brains need?
5. The opening quote to this chapter states that love and compassion are crucial in educating children. What do you think can help parents nurture their children with love and compassion? What can communities do to support parents in raising kids?

Chapter 5: Nourishing Words: The Lasting Impact of Early Language

Chapter 5 dives into greater detail on why and how to talk frequently and respond attentively to infants and children. The author discusses seven characteristics of parent-child talk that can positively affect language development: it's child-directed, melodic, loving, spoken in the home language, repetitive, expressive, and responsive. The chapter also looks at the benefits of reading aloud and cultivating mindfulness while interacting with young children.

THIS CHAPTER'S QUOTE

Our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different from ours?

— Audre Lorde

What does this quote mean? What is its relationship to this chapter? In what ways does it resonate or evoke a response in you?

Audre Lorde was a poet, essayist, novelist, and activist whose work focused on the many intersections of our identity and the social and political impacts of those intersections. Her incisive and powerful voice has helped galvanize feminist, womanist, black, disability, and gay liberation movements; this breadth of influence is fitting, as Lorde held that different struggles for justice share much in common. She was the poet laureate of New York from 1991 until she died in 1992. The quote is from her essay, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," first published in 1977.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. The author discusses research around using affectionate words and gestures with children versus stern commands. When you were a child, did the adults around you reach more readily for affection or for authority in their communications with you? Do you think your experience as a child in this regard informs your parenting tendencies?
2. Which of the seven characteristics of healthy parent-child talk come naturally to you? Which ones come less naturally? Do you find yourself fighting any of them? Why do you think this is?
3. Were you read to as a child? If so, what are your memories about that? Do you remember certain stories, your surroundings (the couch, the wallpaper), or the feeling of sitting next to your parent or caregiver? If you don't remember being read to, what are your earliest memories around books?
4. The author connects parent-child interactions to mindfulness. What do you think about this? What's your reaction to the finding that parents felt less stress during periods of attentive interaction with their children?
5. Have you tried the TALK method described in this chapter? If so, how did it go? How might you modify the method to interact with older children?

Chapter 6: Taking Turns: How to Make Conversation a Habit from Day One

Chapter 6 lays out research underscoring the importance of talking with babies and children, and responding to their vocalizations. It goes on to offer practical advice for establishing strong conversational rituals and routines with your child—even if you don't consider yourself a very talkative person.

THIS CHAPTER'S QUOTE

*Every day, in a 100 small ways, our children ask,
“Do you hear me? Do you see me? Do I matter?”
— L.R. Knost*

What does this quote mean? What is its relationship to this chapter? In what ways does it resonate or evoke a response in you?

L.R. Knost is a children's rights advocate and author of many books, guides, and other print and digital publications. Her work focuses on gentle parenting, a philosophy that centers on empathetic partnership with your child as opposed to authoritative rule.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. What did you learn as a child about kids' roles in conversation when adults are in the room? Were you expected to stay silent? If not, was your authentic participation encouraged, or were you expected to limit your participation, for example to niceties?
2. Do you consider yourself taciturn or talkative? What is the distinction between talking "at" a child or "with" them? Which specific strategies from the chapter might offer the best points of departure for you?
3. Do you see a difference between your own screen use and the screen use you'd expect of your child? How can we balance the usefulness of screens for everyday functioning and the benefits of putting them down?
4. In the Try This at Home box, the author illuminates how some common games children play can fuel positive parent-child interaction. What do you think about viewing play as essential brain-building time? What are some other children's games that might support interaction, language, and learning?
5. What could help parents maintain responsive, nourishing relationships with their kids in the face of the "daily hassles" of family life? How might communities support this?

Chapter 7: Sound Instruction: The Tenor of Reading Success

Chapter 7 delves into phonological awareness—the ability to recognize the range of large and small sound units in words, from individual speech sounds to syllables and everything in between. It looks at how rhyming and various sound games help develop and solidify this awareness, which is crucial to reading, writing, and spelling.

THIS CHAPTER'S QUOTE

Everything in writing begins with language. Language begins with listening.
— Jeanette Winterson

What does this quote mean? What is its relationship to this chapter? In what ways does it resonate or evoke a response in you?

Jeanette Winterson is an award-winning author accomplished in a variety of forms, including novels, essays, short stories, children's works, and screen- and radio writing. She is known for her playful and unexpected interweaving of fantasy and memoir on themes of religion, family, gender, and sexuality. She is also a journalist, penning a regular column in The Guardian and contributing reviews and articles to various other journalistic outlets.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Have you thought about words and sounds as things to play with? Do you remember playing with words as a kid? Do you tend to be playful with words and sounds now?
2. The author says that an irony of raising readers is that the critically important work of building foundational skills is best done with the lightest touch. Can you think of other instances in child-raising where using a light touch on a heavy topic might be a good rule of thumb?
3. Thinking about the imperative to have a light touch on important work, what individual, family, and societal forces might help you personally strike this balance? What individual, family, and societal forces might work against you in this balance?
4. Do you have any experience speaking languages other than English or living somewhere your language wasn't the dominant language? Did any aspects of the section on home language surprise you? Did any resonate with your understanding?
5. What are your experiences with dialects other than standard English, regional accents, or cultural accents? Do you have strong reactions to certain dialects or accents, your own or those of others? Did any aspects of the section on dialects and accents surprise you? Did any resonate with your understanding?

Chapter 8: L is for Liberation: How to Help Kids Crack the Alphabetic Code

Chapter 8 explores strategies for teaching the alphabet in all its aspects, from recognizing written letters and writing them to identifying the sounds they make. The author roots the importance of teaching letters in pedagogy and also in history, vividly illustrating the great value enslaved people attached to reading and the huge risks they ran to learn and teach it. The author enumerates tips for teaching letters (and gives activities to go with each):

1. Call letters by their name
2. Assess letter-name knowledge
3. Draw attention to letters and their shapes
4. Sing, then say, the ABCs
5. Encourage letter-making however they can
6. Teach unknown letters from easiest to hardest

THIS CHAPTER'S QUOTE

The alphabet is an abolitionist. If you would keep a people enslaved refuse to teach them to read.
— *Harper's Weekly Editorial*, 1867

What does this quote mean? What is its relationship to this chapter? In what ways does it resonate or evoke a response in you?

Harper's Weekly was an illustrated magazine published from 1857 to 1912 that grew to become a source of trusted news and pro-Union opinion during and after the U.S. Civil War. In this essay, the editors asserted that freedom, enfranchisement, and literacy are indisputably interconnected, and that therefore access to education for formerly enslaved people was imperative for peace and democracy.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. The author begins the chapter with historical accounts of the lengths to which enslavers went to stop free and enslaved black people from reading. Do you see repercussions or continuing effects from these anti-literacy efforts today? Are you aware of cases in your lifetime where people have viewed literacy, reading, books, or writing as dangerous or off-limits to some people?
2. The author states that while literacy remains a powerful means of resistance and liberation, "there are still considerable obstacles to its attainment, especially for children who are poor, brown, or black." What do you think about this finding? What could change this? What implications and/or responsibilities does it suggest for you, your family, or your community?
3. What's your reaction to the change in kindergarten expectations over the last few decades that the author describes in this chapter?
4. Which tools for alphabet learning (from puzzles to books and beyond) appeal to you the most? Is there a practice you read about in this chapter that you want to try? Can you remember anything about how you learned the 26 letters—their names, shapes, and many sounds?
5. The author discusses oral storytelling, television, clothing, and food packaging as fodder for teaching letters and language. How does this interplay with the negatives of "screen time" and the importance of print books? What do you see as a positive balance? How might families maintain that balance?

Chapter 9: Word Wisdom: How to Spell Your Way to Better Reading

Chapter 9 investigates the importance of good spelling and how to achieve it, along with at-home strategies for teaching your child spelling while keeping the interaction light and fun. The chapter ends with some lessons readers can take to heart from Scripps spelling-bee winners—and, especially, their parents.

THIS CHAPTER'S QUOTE

For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the dearest word to have been once a brilliant picture.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

What does this quote mean? What is its relationship to this chapter? In what ways does it resonate or evoke a response in you?

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a 19th-century poet, essayist, and philosopher. He was a key figure in the Transcendentalist Movement, which postulated a spiritual connection between all things in the universe and emphasized personal spiritual exploration over organized religion. He first captured this philosophy in his book *Nature* and expounded on it in subsequent writings. Emerson also played an influential role in expanding American understanding of classical Indian, Chinese, and Persian works. The quote is from his essay “The Poet” (1844).

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Is spelling important, in your opinion? Does spelling matter in the days of autocorrect, voice-to-text, and instant translation? Why or why not?
2. Does spelling knowledge tie in with other important knowledge and understanding? Is learning spelling connected to any deeper comprehension that adds value beyond the superficial appearance of writing?
3. A lot of historical information is coded into the way words are spelled. Is this something you’ve learned about before? Does it interest you? Do you think schools should teach children about this? Why or why not?
4. Do you consider yourself a good speller? What do you think contributed to your relative spelling capacity and confidence? Are you willing or reluctant to dig into spelling with your child? Why or why not?
5. The author suggests viewing children’s spellings as information to discover what they currently understand, rather than simply judging them right or wrong. Are there other situations where you can apply this same approach? Are there times you’ve used this approach in your own life?

Chapter 10: Extra Credit: How Savvy Parents Keep Learning

In Chapter 10, the author reminds us that scholarly research is constantly evolving, highlighting the fact that recommendations and best practices will continue to evolve as well. She makes the case for staying informed, and discussing how to find and assess information about the latest research. She concludes the chapter by offering parents a simple method to orient themselves when they feel a little lost along their children's developmental journey.

THIS CHAPTER'S QUOTE

Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it.
— Samuel Johnson

What does this quote mean? What is its relationship to this chapter? In what ways does it resonate or evoke a response in you?

Samuel Johnson, born in 1709, was a revered and influential English writer who developed a new dictionary that's heralded as a masterpiece to this day. Johnson was also a celebrated essayist, biographer, poet, satirist, editor, and journalist. The quote is from Boswell's Life of Johnson (1791), a biography of Samuel Johnson written by his mentee and close friend, James Boswell.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. What scientific studies or scholarly research have you heard about in the news (on any topic, not just literacy)? Do news reports accurately reflect scientific results? Can they over-inflate or underplay their significance? How can you evaluate such news reports?
2. As an ever-evolving field, the history of science is by nature littered with theories and findings that were once viewed as fact and are now dismissed, overturned by newer discoveries. How can you evaluate scientific news in light of this evolving nature? What would you look for to evaluate or act upon a finding?
3. In an age of digital media overload, where do you get information and how do you evaluate it? Do you read widely or stick to a few known sources? Do you proactively seek information or consume what shows up in your social feeds? How and why did you choose to read this book, for example?
4. In parenting, as in anything, there's a lot of "common wisdom" floating around. Some of it may be rooted in deep experience, while some is based on misperceptions or downright false. Can you think of anything you accepted as given that turned out to be wrong? Is there any common wisdom you'd like to research more?
5. Have you participated in a research study or would you consider joining one? Would you let your child? Why or why not? What would you look for in a study before you or your child signed up?

Conclusion: Raising All Readers

The conclusion briefly recaps each chapter's subject and reinforces the importance of building pre-reading skills in young children. The author closes by encouraging parents to consider not only their own child's development and prospects, but those of all children.

THIS CHAPTER'S QUOTE

*Human rights are not things that are put on the table for people to enjoy.
These are things you fight for and then you protect.*
— Wangari Maathai

What does this quote mean? What is its relationship to this chapter? In what ways does it resonate or evoke a response in you?

Kenyan activist and author Wangari Muta Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement, which supports communities, especially women, to plant trees as a way of improving the environment and their own lives. The movement has planted 30 million trees so far in Kenya and beyond. Dr. Maathai fought for democracy in Kenya and served in the Kenyan parliament and other roles. She's won many awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. Maathai was the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Which aspects of early literacy do you feel most confident, prepared, and/or interested in teaching? Which less so? Why do you think this is? What are your next steps?
2. Did this book reinforce what you've learned elsewhere or what you already thought about raising a reader? Did it surprise you in any ways, or depart from what you previously believed? What's your reaction?
3. Each chapter opened with a quotation. Do any of them stand out in your memory? Which are your favorites? Why?
4. What do you make of the author's call for parents and other readers to advocate for all children? How could you do that?
5. After reading this book, how do you think your community could improve literacy for all children? Are there actions that neighbors, community organizations, and others could take to foster or promote literacy for all?

About the Author

Maya Payne Smart helps parents nurture, teach, and advocate for children on the road to reading. Her book, *Reading for Our Lives: A Literacy Action Plan from Birth to Six*, offers a step-by-step guide to raising readers, interspersed with fascinating forays into research and history and enlivened with personal anecdotes. She also publishes book lists, literacy activities, and other free family resources weekly on her website, MayaSmart.com, which is dedicated to helping parents play their dual roles as first teachers and educational advocates. Smart serves as affiliated faculty in Educational Policy and Leadership in the College of Education at Marquette University.