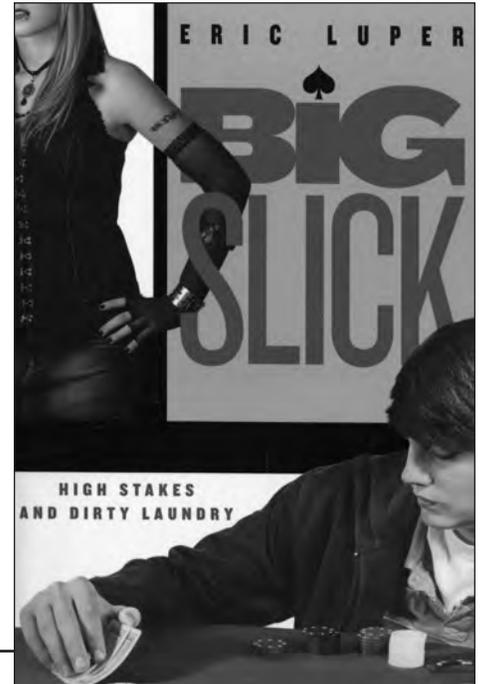


Teachers' Guide

Big Slick



by Eric Luper

Introduction

Andrew Lang seems like a typical high school junior: he goes to school, works in his father's dry-cleaning store, and pines after Jasmine, the girl who works alongside him. However, Andrew, a math whiz, spends his free time at the illegal poker tables in the basement of a local pool hall. The pool hall's owner, Shushie, mentors Andrew and shows him the ropes of Texas Hold 'Em. Andrew grasps the concepts of odds and betting structure easily. Soon, he builds his bankroll and grows overly confident. When Andrew's luck takes a turn for the worse, he "borrows" \$600 from the till at his father's business to get him out of the hole, and hides the daily receipts to cover for the money he has taken.

Andrew's lying and sneaky behavior take a toll on his relationships with friends and family. His best friend, Scott, has begun to feel excluded from Andrew's life. Then there is Jasmine, who may be blamed if money is discovered missing. Andrew's mother, trying to pull Andrew out of his shell, has him longing for the days when homemade cookies made everything better. And Andrew's

father is too obsessed with the business, his vintage muscle car named Yoko, and coaching the girls' losing basketball team to pay attention to anything Andrew does — or so Andrew believes.

After an intense encounter with the social underbelly of his hometown, which is headed up by Shushie, Andrew finally admits his situation to Scott and Jasmine. In an ill-advised, risky attempt to set things right, the three head to Crystal Waters Casino in Andrew's father's car, bankrolled by cash taken from Scott's father, to win back the "borrowed" money. Along the way, friendships are mended, romance is discovered, and the love between father and son is poignantly confirmed.

This novel is about relationships and choices. Andrew believes that his father cares more about his business, car, and basketball team than his own son, capturing the dichotomy between what adolescents perceive and what is true. As he comes clean on his mistakes and poor choices, Andrew mends the relationships important to him and forges new ones. Andrew becomes a hero by finally being honest with himself and trusting those around him.

Classroom Connections

A critical reading of this novel can incorporate many of the essential reading and language arts skills, including reading comprehension strategies as well as making connections between the text and students' lives. Since this story deals with the relationships and choices that face young adults daily, it offers the opportunity for meaningful small- and large-group discussion. Students may experiment with role-playing scenes to further enhance comprehension and make personal connections to the text. This type of cooperative learning allows students to delve further into the development of the characters, examining how each affects the outcome of the novel.

Students may also use response journaling to explore the hot-button issues of domestic abuse, drug abuse, and gambling in a non-threatening form. They can connect their ideas to current events, health classes, and mathematics. Math teachers may want to coordinate instruction by giving lessons on ratio, odds, and combinations based on a standard deck of playing cards.

Standards

This guide includes discussion questions and activities that meet the following national curriculum standards:

English Language Arts:

Students

- read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works
- read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience
- apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding

of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics)

- adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes
- employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes
- apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts
- conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience
- develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles
- participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities
- use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information)

Social Studies:

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of

- culture and cultural diversity
- individual development and identity
- interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions

Math:

Instruction in mathematics should incorporate

- the use of the mathematics to solve problems
- an application of logical reasoning to justify procedures and solutions
- an involvement in the design and analysis of multiple representations to learn, make connections among, and communicate about the ideas within and outside of mathematics

Pre-Reading Activities

Andrew spends much of the novel trying to right his wrong. How is he going to replace the money he took from the register before his father discovers it? Ask students to write a journal entry describing a time when they made a decision that they tried to hide or cover up. Who were they hiding from? Were they afraid of their parents' reaction or potential disappointment? Have them explain how the situation resolved itself.

Cooperative Group Activities

Ask students to write a script, using effective dialogue and language, for a scene in which Andrew decides to come clean to his father. Who else is present in the scene? What is the outcome?

In small groups, have students decide what would be in Jasmine's scrapbook. How would the book be broken up? What was Jasmine's childhood like? Where does she live? Is there a reason she hides behind her Goth-girl persona? Taking it one step further, encourage students to create a collage of what would be in her scrapbook.

Discussion

Andrew decided to keep all of his feelings bottled up inside instead of confiding in someone. Have students take on the role of Andrew's guidance counselor: Scott has just divulged everything that is going on in Andrew's life. What advice would they give Andrew?

The relationship between Andrew and his father is very strained. What are some character traits of each that lead to this perceived estrangement? What does Andrew learn about his father, and vice versa, when Andrew returns from Crystal Waters Casino with Yoko? Predict what will happen to their relationship in the future.

Each chapter title is the name of a different poker hand. What is the significance of each name, and why did the author choose the hand for each chapter?

Describe Andrew's final confrontation with Shushie. What does Andrew discover about himself that changes his attitude forever?

Describe Shushie as a person. What makes him tick? Greed, power, and control are all part of Shushie's life. Why do you think he has chosen the business that he is in? Did he really care about Andrew? Explain.

Ask students to describe a time in their lives when they discovered that someone was different from who he/she portrayed himself/herself to be. This could be positive or negative. How did this experience affect subsequent relationships?

Reaching across the Curriculum

Social Studies

The connection between gambling and society

Poker tournaments are all over the television and the Internet. More and more people are getting into the game, especially teenagers. What is the effect of poker on young adults who play? Does playing poker lead to a gambling addiction? How does this type of addiction affect a community's social resources? Is poker a more socially acceptable form of gambling due to its increased popularity? Are more teenagers playing poker today? Why?

Social/Emotional

The effect of domestic abuse and drug abuse on society

Many young people are faced with very difficult situations. Ask students to research how to seek help if someone is being abused by a boyfriend or girlfriend. Students may choose to do an independent project on drug use and abuse in their school district in conjunction with the health or physical education teacher. Furthermore, students may decide to explore teenage gambling and where it is most prevalent. What types of gambling — poker, football, horse racing — tend to lure young adults? Why? What makes gambling so appealing?

Math

Examining the odds of getting a certain card in a standard deck

Create word problems that involve card game scenarios. Describe the hands dealt, how many players are present, and their starting hands. What are the odds a certain card will be dealt next? What is the ratio involved?

Hooked on television as a child, writing did not come easily to Eric. He says, "Emily Dickinson wrote, 'There is no frigate like a book / To take us lands away.' I just didn't get on the boat until really late."

Big Slick is Eric's first novel, and his second novel is in progress. Eric currently lives in Albany, New York, with his wife, Elaine, and their two children, Ethan and Lily.

About the Author

Eric Luper grew up in Springfield, New Jersey, and has lived in various places in New York, as well as in New Brunswick, New Jersey. With a degree in English and creative writing from Rutgers College, Eric decided to expand his knowledge and attend chiropractic school. He began a booming practice in Albany, New York, but the lure of the written word remained strong. Eric soon discovered that storytelling was what he really wanted to do.



Photo © Chuck Fishbein

For more on Eric Luper:

Web sites:

www.fsgkidsbooks.com

Contains more information about the author and his book.

Big Slick by Eric Luper

ISBN-13: 978-0-374-30799-8 · ISBN-10: 0-374-30799-7

240 pages · \$16.00

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

19 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003

Visit www.fsgkidsbooks.com for more information about titles, authors, and illustrators and to access other Teachers' Guides, Bibliographies, and more.

This guide was prepared by Andrey T. Drury, an English teacher at Shenendehowa Central Schools in Clifton Park, New York.
