



READER'S GUIDE

Smart Girl: A First-Gen Origin Story

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The early chapters, “Inches,” “Speaker of the House,” “Fangirl,” and “Rebel Girl” (among others) demonstrate the various ways that Tee’s family prepared her for college.

What were some of the values, tools, or mindsets her family passed down—whether intentionally or not—that shaped her readiness for college? How might we expand our own definitions of “college prep” to include these kinds of intergenerational resources and survival strategies, particularly in first-gen communities?



Paper—whether mail, tax forms, letters, or school assignments—carries deep significance throughout *Smart Girl*. Trace how printed documents shape Tee’s understanding of identity, responsibility, and survival.

What does paper symbolize in her home life versus in academic settings? In what ways do written documents still shape belonging, legitimacy, or mobility for the first-gen students you work with?



In *Smart Girl*, student mobility is both a logistical challenge and an emotional undercurrent. Tee’s mom believed it was best for her to attend high school in Washington, D.C., even though Tee had found a strong sense of belonging and identity in Northern Virginia at George Washington Junior High School—especially through her role on the cheerleading team.

Do you agree with Mom’s decision? Further, should Tee have stayed at Dunbar High School to avoid another school transition? What does this moment reveal about the trade-offs first-gen families often face when navigating educational access, opportunity, and stability? How do we balance academic strategy with a young person’s developing sense of self and community?



Libraries play a recurring yet nuanced role throughout *Smart Girl*.

What happens in those moments? In what ways do libraries serve as sites of resistance, refuge, or revelation?

Consider how these spaces support or complicate Tee’s sense of identity and belonging at different stages of her life.

How are you currently leveraging libraries and library staff to support first-gen students on your own campus or in your classroom—beyond books and technology resources? What could be improved?



Tee’s journey west is threaded with hope, myth, and pop culture.

What were her perceptions of California — Oakland and Los Angeles in particular — before she arrived? What people, media, or moments shaped those ideas? How did her real experience at UCLA and in L.A. align with — or challenge — that vision? What does this reveal about the gap between dreams and reality for first-gen students forging new paths far from home?



It's often said that many students feel even more first-gen in graduate or professional school—when the social rules get murkier, the stakes get higher, and the hidden curriculum runs deeper.

How does Tee's first-gen identity show up and evolve during her time in the UCLA Department of English? In what ways does she confront (or conform to) the implicit expectations of academia? What moments reflect imposter syndrome, coded gatekeeping, or unexpected community? How might faculty and departments better support first-gen graduate students navigating these layered identities and pressures?



Throughout *Smart Girl*, Tee treats pop culture—album covers, liner notes, music video countdowns, song lyrics—as worthy of deep attention and study. Long before grad school, she was already researching, analyzing, and interpreting the world around her, often getting rewarded for it through contests and recognition.

How does this early engagement with cultural texts lay the foundation for her scholarly identity? In what ways does *Smart Girl* invite us to expand our understanding of what counts as research, knowledge, or intellectual preparation? What forms of "unofficial" scholarship do first-gen students often bring with them, and how can educators better affirm and integrate that into academic spaces?



SUBMITTED BY IKA BUENAVISTA GONZALES, LOS ANGELES, CA

What can teachers work on at school to make sure more kids like Tita Tee go to college?



SUBMITTED BY HON. GEORGE TURNER, LOS ANGELES, CA

Throughout the story, Tee details many challenges and obstacles that she had to overcome.

What is your definition of smart? What does being smart mean to you? How did being “smart” impact her ability to succeed and did her challenges shape her ability to be smart. Please provide specific examples from the text.



SUBMITTED BY DR. MARY BLANCHARD WALLACE, BIRMINGHAM, AL

Tee's story focuses on her readiness, entry and matriculation through college. Notice that student affairs professionals were not front and center of Tee's. Even when student affairs could have been helpful, they were focused on process and policy (i.e. Residential Life). Reflect on the following from her journey and think about ways student affairs professionals in college impact student success:

- Navigating the financial structures of a university
- Communication strategies of a university
- The ways in which popular culture is highlighted or restrained at a university
- Hidden curriculum - inside and outside of the classroom
- The role of mentors and sponsors, especially for first-generation students
- Bureaucratic processes of a university and how students understand or don't understand these structures

In your role, how have you:

1. Contributed to systemic barriers to student success?
2. Removed or limited the barriers in your control so students can thrive?

ACTIVITY: SUPPORT FOR LENITA

Objective

Create the kind of support network that might have helped Lenita stay in school—and thrive.

Instructions

Working solo or in small groups, imagine you're on a student success task force at Elizabeth City State University, a small HBCU in a rural area. Your mission: design an intervention that could have helped Lenita stay enrolled and complete her degree.

Create a mini plan that includes

- A resource or program (e.g., campus food pantry, emergency grant fund, peer mentor network)
- A point of contact or advocate (e.g., faculty member, resident assistant, advisor, community elder)
- A check-in strategy to catch issues early (e.g., wellness survey, dorm meeting, class attendance flag)
- One cultural or emotional support that centers first-gen or Black women's lived experiences

End by giving your program a name.

