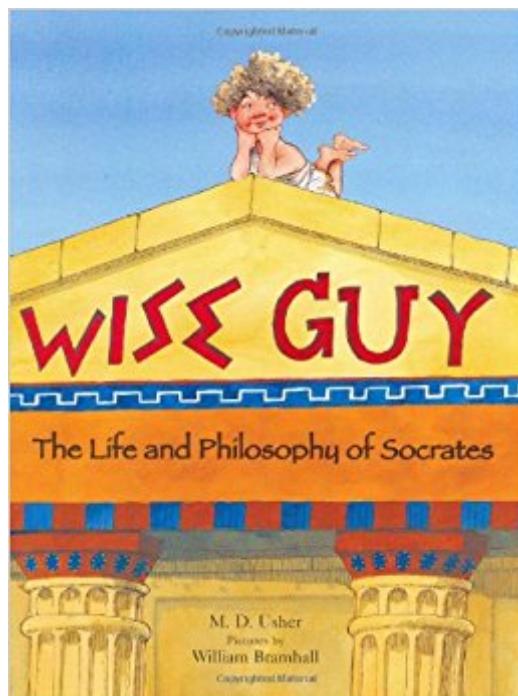


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# Wise Guy: The Life And Philosophy Of Socrates



## **Synopsis**

Greek philosophy for kids" "I know that I know nothing." With this classic statement, uttered over two thousand years ago, Socrates set the standard for the future of Western philosophy. By day, he soaked up the sun in the Athenian marketplace, where he'd converse for hours on end about the meaning of wisdom, right and wrong, courage, justice, and love. By night, he feasted and danced with friends. He was charming, but not handsome, happy, but not rich. Unfortunately, his method of thinking did not sit well with everyone. In the end, his fellow Athenians punished him with death. The story of Socrates' life unfolds through cheerful illustrations and a two-tiered text, one layer quite simple, the other full of juicy additional details about the philosopher's life and times. The ending assembles a "School of Athens," showcasing thinkers, from Erasmus to Martin Luther King, Jr., who have been inspired by Socrates' philosophy.

## **Book Information**

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Age Range: 8 - 13 years

Grade Level: 3 and up

## **Customer Reviews**

Grade 2-5 "This ambitious attempt to present the life and thinking of this ancient Greek philosopher to young readers does so with mixed results. The text has two tiers. The first layer (presented in a larger font) is, according to the book jacket, quite simple, while the second (presented in smaller print in a scroll-shaped box) is full of juicy additional details. Both sections contain statements that are oversimplifications of complex ideas and require further background or explanation. In one

particularly confusing section of the book, the first tier states that Apollo, god of wisdom, loved Socrates dearly. 'No one is as wise, or good, or brave as he,' Apollo said. The other gods agreed. The line between Socrates's beliefs and fact is blurred here and elsewhere. There are, however, many instances where Usher distills the essence of Socrates's thinking into approachable terms, such as in his discussion that compares the idea of the blueprint for a bed to a blueprint for larger concepts: Just as a carpenter with vast knowledge and experience can make a good bed, and in turn be a good carpenter, a person who has studied the blueprint of right and wrong can be a good person. With the exception of some fictionalizing in terms of his subject's childhood, Usher has been careful to use documented sources, and the writing style itself flows reasonably well. Bramhall's amusing cartoons greatly enliven the presentation. Anyone wishing to introduce the field of philosophy to students would find this offering a useful starting point.â "Grace Oliff, Ann Blanche Smith School, Hillsdale, NJ Copyright Â© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Gr. 2-4. This cheerful picture-book biography of Socrates has two concurrent texts: the story of his life, which is freely fictionalized and unconvincing in its description of the early years, and, in smaller print, an introduction to the philosopher's ideas, which is actually quite good. As Usher states in the appended notes, "Socrates' adult interests have been imaginatively read back into his youth." The result is a child character who sounds utterly unchildlike. In a sudden growth spurt shown in the illustrations but unexplained in the text, Socrates grows from a scruffy child on one double-page spread to a scruffy man on the next. The accessible style of the sophisticated ink-and-watercolor artwork is reminiscent of that of a cartoonist or caricaturist. And on the closing pages, there are caricatures of later thinkers, from Erasmus to Gandhi, who comment on Socrates. A note on sources and a short bibliography (labeled "For Further Reading" but clearly aimed at adults) are appended as well. Parents who can't wait to introduce their elementary-school progeny to Socrates will find this an original, but not wholly successful, choice. Carolyn PhelanCopyright Â© American Library Association. All rights reserved

This is a brilliant, heart-felt, humorous yet serious introduction to Socrates and his philosophy. It is obvious that the author knows everything about Socrates. Knowing everything often produces a bad book, because the author tries to fit that everything into the shape of a book. This isn't the case with M.D. Usher, who selects salient details that show Socrates' respect for the common people and their wisdom, that show he served in the army and marched barefooted, that show he knew his own

worth and contributions to his city and, indeed, to all of humanity. The story is told on two levels, as in Snowflake Bentley, with one level, the running narrative, talking to both younger and older children, and the other level, the scrolled-in text, addressing issues that older children can comprehend and think about. A highly recommended book, providing not only information, but food for thought for both children and adults.

"Wise Guy: The Life and Philosophy of Socrates" by M.D. Usher is an excellent resource book for middle schoolers taking a world history class. Our standards require students to describe the key figures and major beliefs of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Greek philosophy.... This book simplifies the philosophy of Socrates for our 6th graders. The illustrations by William Bramhall further help the students grasp the information - especially our ELL learners who benefit from the colorful visuals that bring the child right to the agora in ancient Athens where they can see Athenians discussing life's tough topics including , justice, right and wrong, wisdom, courage, beauty, love.... "All I know is that I know nothing" - Socrates

I love this book! Having studied philosophy in college, I wanted to introduce my children to the subject. (Aristotle himself said that all philosophy begins with a child-like sense of wonder.) The author, a philosophy professor, does a marvelous job of presenting not only Socrates' life and times but also his philosophical ideas in a simple, straightforward way. My small children (one a beginning reader) had no trouble at all following the basic storyline, and my husband and I learned a lot we didn't know from the commentary that accompanies each page. Socrates was a rationalist, but what I especially like about this book is that we get to see Socrates' mystical or spiritual side, which is presented in a lighthearted, yet serious way. The best part about this book, however, are the artful illustrations. Some scenes are whimsical (like the picture of Socrates dancing), others touching (especially the pages dealing with Socrates' trial and death). I've looked at this book two or three times since I bought it and I expect it will get many more readings over the years.

My two fellas, ages 8 and 10, absolutely love this book. It strikes a fine balance between elementary-age entertainment and providing factual information about the life & times of Socrates. The illustrations are fantastic and serve to make the facts more memorable. Wish there was a little something like this for Plato, Hippocrates and the rest!

Excellent overview of who Socrates was, his life, and his way of thinking. I have read this to my two

sons (5/9) and they both enjoyed it (text and artwork). Socrates is at the foundation of western thinking and philosophy.

When I read the review of the book, It sounded great. When it actually arrived and I found it was not an actual "book" book but a large (9x11.25") very thin (40 pages) kids book I felt a bit cheated. (No fault of . All the info was presented if I'd bothered to read the details.) Still I felt disappointed. Then I read the book. The illustrations are superb and the text is thought provoking. I'm still sorry there isn't more to it, but I'm very glad I ordered it.

All those days of torture came back to me-- the "Socratic Method" they called it... THEY being my oral surgery profs. They just kept asking questions until we ran out of answers. Mark Usher brings the father of philosophy to life in *Wise Guy*, an easy-to-read, well-illustrated primer for kids. The book is appropriate for two age groups, 6-8 and 9-12, as it is written and illustrated for the younger readers in the main frames, with more dissertation on sidebars for the pre-teens. The book covers Socrates' early life as he attempted to pin down the basic concept of the idea. It continues along, with Socrates picking up disciples as he developed the dialectic-- his framework for the logical analysis of ideas. The eternal question of the nature of good and evil prompts him to spawn the logical basis for ethics. Finally, as his enemies bring him to trial for his teachings, it is the ethics he deduced that left him no alternative but the cup of hemlock. In a world of post-modern cultural and ethical relativism, it is precisely Socrates who can offer our young people an anchor in the form of logical analysis of ethical dilemmas. The pursuit of wisdom is the pursuit of truth, which is in reality the search for an absolute. Contrast this to our modern culture's use of phrases such as "my truth" and "what's right for me", and the book offers its best lesson. Written in a lighthearted, storybook fashion, one is hard pressed to be saddened at the demise of Socrates. His death marked the notion that no man is above the law, despite its imperfections. This is important to note for parents concerned about the appropriate time to introduce literature with death involved. It is definitely not frightening as presented. More could have been mentioned about the Socrates-Plato-Aristotle continuum, but for the intended reader this may be more dialogue than needed to get the message across. All in all this is a good work

Bill Koch, DDS  
Barre, Vermont

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