

SAHARA SPECIAL

by Esmé Raji Codell

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TEACHER'S GUIDE

HYPERION BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

LESSON PLAN SERIES

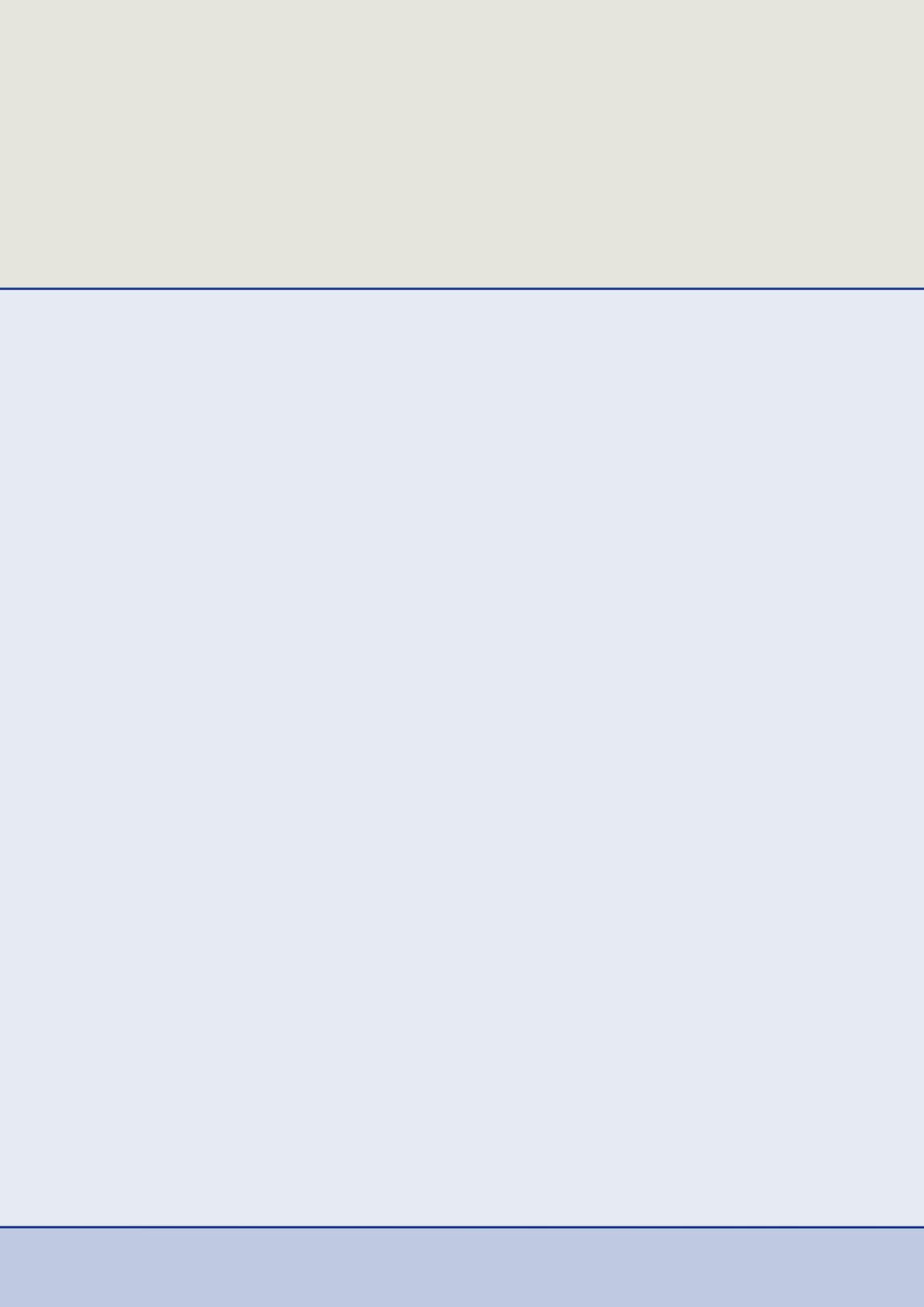


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PLOT SUMMARY

Sahara Jones wants to be a writer. But after her father left she stopped writing *anything* in school, including her homework, although she does write privately, for herself. The school keeps a file on her lack of activity and decides she needs special education. Her mother insists she be allowed to succeed or fail on her own. Now Sahara must repeat the fifth grade, an idea she dreads, until she meets her new teacher Madame Poitier (“Miss Pointy” to the kids). With her eggplant-colored lipstick and strange subjects such as “Puzzling” and “Time Travel,” Miss Pointy is like no other teacher the kids have known. Through the year her storytelling, journal writing, and unwavering encouragement allow Sahara to learn about accomplishment, friendship, and respect. Most importantly, Sahara finally begins to share her writing and explore her talents.

REVIEWS

★ “Codell has created a remarkable cast of characters. Sahara’s first-person account beautifully and poignantly captures her tenuous steps to self-understanding . . . Oh that a teacher the likes of Miss Poitier could really survive and multiply in our . . . public schools. An absolutely lovely debut for children from the author of *Educating Esmé* (1999).”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “Presenting memorable characters in spirited scenes, this novel will surely be empowering for reluctant learners—and thought-provoking and gratifying for everyone.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“Codell has a plainspoken yet vivid creativity of expression that gives the story an effervescent enjoyability . . . ultimately it’s Codell’s firm championing of her underdog narrator that provides the satisfaction here.”

—*The Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*

“Miss Pointy joins the constellation of fictional teachers who serve as models for students and teachers alike. Give Codell a shiny sticker from Miss Pointy’s Happy Box.”

—*The Horn Book*

CHARACTERS

Sahara Jones: lives with her mother in an apartment in Chicago, likes to write in her own private journal, and then hide the pages in the library, misses her father who has left the family

Mrs. Jones: Sahara's mother

Peaches: the name Sahara secretly gives to the special education teacher, in charge of delivering "special services" to Sahara and Darrell Sikes

Madame Poitier: pronounced Pwah-tee-YAY (rhymes with touché!), the new fifth-grade teacher, allows the children to call her Miss Pointy

Darrell Sikes: troublemaking classmate of Sahara's, also held back to repeat fifth-grade

Rachel Wells: Sahara's younger cousin and Sahara's best friend

Paris: a classmate who loves to read and tries to befriend Sahara

Luz: a classmate, best friend of Paris, earns many stickers of approval from Miss Pointy

Ernie: likes to go to the library and participate in class, enjoys Miss Pointy's fables

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you were writing the "history of you," what would you include that most people at school don't know about you? (p. 2, p. 50)
2. What is the point of doing schoolwork? Why does Sahara decide not to do her work? (p. 4)
3. In what ways are Sahara and Darrell alike? In what ways are they different? (pp. 1–13)
4. Sahara's mother agrees to Sahara's being failed so that she will repeat fifth grade. Why is her mother smiling after this scene? Why is Sahara proud of her? Do you know anyone who is not afraid of failure? Are you more like Sahara ("would rather not try than fail") or her mother? (p. 12)

5. Think about your best friend. Why is that person your best friend? What sets him/her apart from others you know? What things do you do together? What things do you do for each other? Think about what you would ideally like in a best friend. (pp. 15–16)
6. Do you think “everyday” stuff is interesting? Why or why not? (p. 17)
7. What qualities does Sahara have that make it difficult for her to make friends? (pp. 21–29)
8. Would you like to have Madame Poitier for a teacher? What is your first impression of her? What do you hope someone’s first impression might be of you? (pp. 37–55)
9. Why does Miss Pointy call Darrell a thespian? What do you think of her response to his anger? How else might this scene have gone? (p. 46)
10. Miss Pointy says, “True things don’t always happen in the world . . . true things also happen in the imagination.” What kinds of things does Sahara imagine that might be true things? What about you? (p. 71)
11. Why does Darrell tell his mother that Miss Pointy called him a bad name? (p. 73)
12. Miss Pointy writes that the main character is not always the one you like the best. It’s the one who changes. Who is the main character in this story? What is the change? What is the main character in another story you like? What is the change? (p. 86)
13. Sahara says, “A hero is the one who does what’s hard, like Paris taking the blame and losing a friend.” Do you know any heroes? (p. 92)
14. What does Miss Pointy mean when she suggests that Sahara might fail herself? (p. 105)
15. Even though Peaches shows an interest in Darrell and Sahara, neither of them seems eager to go with her. Why? (p. 113)
16. Why do you think Miss Pointy pretends to have a note keeping Darrell in her class? (p. 115)
17. Have you ever been to a place completely different from the place where

you live? Describe the place. If you haven't, imagine a place you would like to go. What does the place feel like, smell like, and look like? (p. 126)

18. On page 143 Sahara imagines what some of her classmates might wish for. Can you guess which child matches each wish? Pick several of your classmates and imagine their wishes.
19. Do you agree that inside each person there is a secret person? What are some of the secrets inside the characters in this book? (p. 145)
20. Tell or write about how you got your name. Have you ever been given a name you didn't want? (p. 150)
21. Do you agree that both Paris's and Sahara's names are appropriate to them? Why?
22. Why did Miss Pointy choose to give Sahara a flowering cactus as a gift? (p. 166)
23. Why does Sahara identify with the Frank O'Hara poem? Why does she choose to share it with Darrell and her mother? (p. 111, p. 174)

ACTIVITIES

PLACE NAME PICTURES

Sahara and Paris are both named after places. They like their names because of what they know about the places they represent. Choose a place you think represents you. Use atlases, the travel section of the newspaper, or travel brochures to research possible places. Sample brochures are available from the chambers of commerce from every state and country. Draw a picture of your place and include those things you believe relate to both the place and you. Write your new name at the top. This can be a private project for a journal. Alternatively, students might write just the name of the place on their picture. Post the pictures in the room and ask the class to write down who they think belongs to each name. A student who does not want to share ideas for his own name might draw a Place Name Picture for a best friend or a family member instead.

TRAVEL BROCHURE

Use the same resource material you obtained for the Place Name Pictures to create a travel brochure for the place where you live. Think about what makes your hometown unique, which spots stand out. Illustrate with drawings or photographs.

MAKE YOUR OWN JOURNAL

Instead of buying blank journals, have your class make their own. This project promotes a sense of real investment in the journal. Students will enjoy personalizing their work. The journals may be as simple as white sheets of paper stapled inside the fold of a large piece of construction paper. (If you plan to keep journals for the whole year these may not be sturdy enough. They do work well for shorter units of study.) For more elaborate ideas on journal making, refer to one of the many resource books available.

Resources:

Pluckrose, Henry. *Book Craft*. 1992, Franklin Watts.

How to Make Books with Children. 1991, Evan Moor Corp. (out of print but available in the library)

INSIDE/OUTSIDE SELF-PORTRAITS

Children create self-portraits on brown-paper lunch bags. Then the decorated bags are filled with items that suggest things about them on the inside that people can't tell by looking on the outside. For example, Sahara knows she is a writer, so she might have put a small pencil or notebook inside her paper bag. Use markers, crayons, or colored pencils. Add yarn and other collage materials for a more elaborate project. These bags need to stand up right, so be sure to draw faces on the smooth side of the bag with the top at the bag's opening. When the drawing is completed, help children think of objects for inside. Ask them to write a list of things they like to do or are interested in learning about. For each item on their list they think of, select a small, easily found object that represents that interest. Choose the best to go in the bag. HINT: Teachers, introduce this project by sharing your own Inside/Outside Self-portrait with the class.

LISTENING WALK

Students take a listening or observation walk around school with their journals. Encourage them to look and listen carefully. They are looking for the “everyday stuff” we often don’t pay attention to. Set aside several journal pages or keep separate writers’ observation notebooks. Write down words they don’t understand, pieces of conversations, or descriptions of interesting people and places to use later in a story.

WORD ENVELOPES

Each student will need a large envelope and pieces of tag board. Every day, each child receives a vocabulary word of his choice. School language, please! You write the word on a piece of tag board, and they put it in their envelope. After some days have past, ask students to write a paragraph or story that includes as many of the words from their word envelope as possible.

AUTHOR, AUTHOR!

Introduce the idea of literary readings to your classroom. Authors are often called on to read selections from their work. They choose passages they especially like or that clearly show their ideas on a specific subject. On special occasions, suggest that it’s time for students to share some of their writing. Set the mood by creating a short ritual to signal the beginning of your event. Gather students in a circle. Light a lamp, use a bell, dim the lights or sing a song to show that this is the beginning of a special time. Reading aloud is always voluntary. The selection need not be long. It might even be a work in progress.

WRITE A FABLE

Talk about the fables Miss Pointy tells. Why does she like these stories? Talk about why Aesop used the animals he did. For example, why isn’t *The Tortoise and the Hare* about a lion and a monkey? Read several fables by Aesop. Read *Fables* by Arnold Lobel to show variations on the theme. Make a class list of favorite morals. Students may pick a moral and write their own fable. These can be added to their journals and illustrated.

Resources:

Aesop. *Aesop's Fables*. Illus. by Jerry Pinkney. 2000, Sea Star.

Aesop. *Classic Treasury of Aesop's Fables*. Illus. by Don Daly. Courage Books.

Aesop. *Fables from Aesop*. Illus. by Tom Lynch. 2002, Puffin.

Bader, Barbara. *Aesop and Company*. Illus. by Arthur Geisert. 1999, Houghton Mifflin.

Lobel, Arnold. *Fables*. 1983, Harper Trophy.

SECRET FILES

Students receive a manila folder to create their own “secret file.” In the file may go a variety of projects that express their secret selves. Just like Sahara’s file kept by the school, these files are not for everyone to see. After you’ve gotten the files started, they should be used periodically as students feel they have something to add. Use some of the following ideas to start or create your own.

Make a word kaleidoscope. Use a marker and a piece of standard-size paper. Draw a line from top to bottom separating the paper in half. Do the same from side to side and then corner to corner. There should be eight triangular sections. In each section students write a word about something important to them. Start in the center and make the letters large enough to completely fill the section. Words might include their name, family members or pets, ideas or places they like, something they are good at, something they fear, traits that describe them, or something they would like to see. Using colored markers or pencils, fill in all the white spaces to complete this personal word kaleidoscope!

Take a word from the kaleidoscope and elaborate by drawing a picture. For example:

Draw a picture of something you are good at.

Draw a daydream you’ve had.

Draw a wish about your life you hope will come true.

Draw an animal you wish you could talk to or be.

Write a letter to a family member. Think about Sahara’s letters to her father. In these letters she is able to say things she never had a chance to say or wouldn’t want to say aloud. Now is your student’s chance to do the same.

INTERVIEW WITH ESMÉ RAJI CODELL

Q: Your previous book was autobiographical. What led you to fiction? Are there autobiographical aspects to *Sahara Special*?

A: All stories start in real life, and are inspired by things we wish were true. Nonfiction was easy for me because I didn't have to make anything up. I just had to describe what was in front of me . . . but I didn't have much control over how the story went. Fiction required me to make a lot more decisions. The thing from my real life that went into this work of fiction is that I really wish school could be a pleasure, a place where children can grow and discover new things about themselves. Once I had that very real wish, I could tell a story about that wish coming true for someone.

Sahara Special started with my remembering one particular girl I knew when I was a fifth-grade teacher, who was very, very quiet but a very talented reader and writer. She liked collecting stickers and had a hard time making friends, and people didn't see all that was good in her right away. I wished that I were a kid again so I could be her friend. Like Sahara, I really do like writing, reading, and an occasional . . . uh . . . "esteeker". I also grew up in Chicago, and would roller-skate inside our apartment until my neighbor knocked on the ceiling. I used to look out my window for the blue of Lake Michigan, and wonder if I'd ever get to go anywhere else.

Darrell was inspired by a boy from my childhood who always made a lot of noise whenever the teacher asked him to do something. I imagined that boy in my head whenever I wrote about Darrell, though I really did meet quite a few boys like Darrell when I was a teacher and a librarian.

When I was writing about Miss Pointy, I sometimes imagined a friend of mine, a very glamorous fifth-grade teacher who really did paint her classroom yellow. She speaks in a straightforward, helpful way to her students, and reads aloud to her class, so I tried to bring her spirit into the book. When Miss Pointy loses her temper, though, I know I am imagining myself. I really did teach "Time Traveling" and "Puzzling" and funny subjects like that, and we really had a trouble basket.

The other parts of the book that are true for me are the questions hidden in the story.

How does parent involvement affect what happens to kids who are in trouble?

What if two kids are having problems, and one kid acts out loudly, but the other kind of curls up inside and is quiet? Do they get the same kind of treatment? Should they?

What if something really hard is happening at home? Should a teacher pay attention to that, or teach like nothing is really going on?

What is it like when a parent is absent on purpose? Can a kid still love herself when she's not sure if that parent loves her?

What's important to learn at school?

What makes a difference in people's lives?

But these real people and questions were just starting points. The things in the story didn't actually happen as they did in real life, at least not to anyone I know. The things that are really true in this fictional book are the things Miss Pointy is trying to share. The feelings are real, too.

Q: What was the most difficult thing about writing this book? The most surprising?

A: One of the most difficult things was keeping this book from being too sad. I don't like "issue books" where everything is about conflict and where I never laugh. At first, in setting up the narrative, it was hard not to be grim in describing Sahara's circumstances. I had to believe my character could rise up. I had to have faith in her. I knew if I could give her some hard knocks and have her succeed, it might help other kids see that things can change.

The most surprising thing was that I had a whole different ending planned out for the story, but when I wrote those final words, I knew it was over. It was like a voice in me whispered, the end. It was a little creepy, but thrilling, too. I didn't know a story could boss me around like that.

Q: Is it important to write realistic books for this age group? What about fantasy?

A: I think it is important for children to see themselves reflected in the literature they read, if only to assert the idea that their stories are worth telling, no matter who they are or what's in their file. Realistic fiction also gives children a chance to make friends vicariously, accomplish things vicariously, so when it's time to do the same thing in their daily lives, they have models. I think realistic fiction can show that it's okay to fail, sometimes; everybody does, that's how we learn. Ultimately, though, realistic fiction and fantasy are very similar in the way they are digested by children. When written well, both are an escape that, upon return, helps the child view the world with new, braver eyes.

Q: Why do you think journaling is a good idea, especially in a classroom setting?

A: I also always loved to write; I have kept diaries since I was seven, and hid them in the cushions of my doll buggy. I wrote so that when I had grandchildren, they would believe I was once really a little girl. Journaling is a good idea because later you can use your journal to remember what it is like to be a kid. That's very helpful in case you end up being a mom or dad or teacher or pediatrician or children's book author. Journaling also helps us take a pause in the routine to really recognize how much happens in a seemingly ordinary day, to use the most powerful senses and ideas we have in that moment and try to preserve them.

In a classroom setting, the real difference is that journaling is going to be read by someone immediately. It's more of a letter-writing experience, and that's okay, too, but it can change the tone and content of the writing. A combination of private journaling and school journaling is great brain exercise. It helps children learn about writing for different audiences and the important lesson that real writing is all about communication, not diagramming sentences or having spelling mistakes circled in red pen. Journaling also encourages children to write a little bit every day, which studies show in combination with reading is best the way to improve the skill and give children confidence to use writing in situations throughout their lives.

Q: Sahara loves the Ramona books; there are many of them. Will you consider writing more about the characters in *Sahara Special*?

A: If children want more stories about Miss Pointy's class, I'd be happy to try and deliver!

FURTHER READING

The View from Saturday by E. L. Konigsburg

The Year of Miss Agnes by Kirkpatrick Hill

Sideways Stories from Wayside School by Louis Sachar

A Long Way from Chicago by Richard Peck

Love that Dog by Sharon Creech

Everything on a Waffle by Polly Horvath

Keep Ms. Sugarman in Fourth Grade by Elizabeth Levy

Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key by Jack Gantos

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Esmé Raji Codell has worked as a children's bookseller, teacher, and school librarian. She now runs the popular children's literature Web site www.planeteseme.com. She is the author of *Educating Esmé: Diary of a Teacher's First Year*, which won an Alex Award given for the best adult book, for young adults, among many honors. *Sahara Special* is her first novel, and her first book for children. She lives in Chicago with her husband and son.

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\$15.99

(\$22.99 in Canada)

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8-12. Struggling with school and her feelings since her father left, Sahara gets a fresh start with a new and unique teacher who supports her writing talents and the individuality of each of her classmates. Me and Darrell Sikes -- My true ambition -- At the library -- New things all the time -- We got her -- Lion's lesson -- George gets busted -- Way things are built -- Miss Pointy gets me where I live -- Orphans -- Why teachers get apples --. Name-calling -- Autobiographia literaria. Middle School. 660. Accelerated Reader. Reading Counts!