

## Literature Circle Guide to SAHARA SPECIAL by Esme Raji Codell

### **Book Summary**

There are two files on Sahara Jones. The one the school counselor keeps is evidence that she's a fifth grader who needs special education. The other is the book Sahara is secretly writing, her *Heart-Wrenching Life Story and Amazing Adventures*. The latest chapter in her book unfolds when her mother insists that she be taken out of special ed. So Sahara is facing fifth grade in the regular classroom, again. But why even try to do the work, Sahara wonders, if everything she does just winds up in the counselor's file?

Enter Miss Pointy, the new fifth-grade teacher. With her eggplant-colored lipstick and strange subjects such as "Puzzling" and "Time Travel," she's like no other teacher Sahara has ever known. When she passes out writing journals to the class, Sahara has fresh hope for the school year. Through Miss Pointy's unusual teaching, storytelling, and quiet support, Sahara finds the courage to overcome her fears and prove which file shows her true self.

### **Author Information**

Esmé Raji Codell is the author of the highly acclaimed and best-selling *Educating Esmé: Diary of a Teacher's First Year*. She has been a keynote speaker for the International Reading Association and the American Library Association, and now runs the popular children's literature Web site, [www.planetesme.com](http://www.planetesme.com). She is also author of the book *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading*, published by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. She lives in Chicago with her husband and son.

### **Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions**

#### **1. On the first day of school, Miss Pointy lists the class subjects on the board. What are these subjects?**

Puzzling, Time Travel and World Exploring or Mad Science, Read Aloud, Read Together, Read Alone, Art of Language (pp. 42-43).

#### **2. Sahara says that her cousin Rachel Wells is her best friend. What is Rachel like? Describe Rachel and her friendship with Sahara.**

Answers describing Rachel may refer to her shyness, quiet voice, that she looks at her feet when she speaks, and "her cheekbones get pink," (p. 14) or that "some of the girls at school thought she was stuck-up," due to this shyness (p. 15), and that Sahara thinks "there's something not nice about shy people, too. Something kind of stingy in the way they make you talk first," (p. 15).

Of their friendship, Sahara gives three reasons why Rachel is her best friend on pages 15-16. The number one reason is that after Rachel moved away for awhile, she returned. Reason number two is because Sahara always has to "look out for her," due to Rachel's shyness. Reason number three is that Rachel knows Sahara's "True Ambition" to be a writer.

Answers may also mention when the girls stay home with stomach flu and Sahara first shares her writing with Rachel (Chapter 9), and when Rachel tells Miss Pointy that Sahara does indeed have a “secret person” inside of her (p. 145).

**3. Sahara has two files, one hidden in the library and one kept in the principal’s office. What is in each of these files?**

Hidden in the library are Sahara’s secret writings, her *Heart-Wrenching Life Story and Amazing Adventures* which constitute the story told in the book (p. 10).

The file in the principal’s office contains mainly confiscated letters Sahara wrote to her father, but also evidence of “sloppy work, of unfinished work” (pp. 1-3), and her mother’s letter to the school requesting that she be removed from the special education program (p. 168).

**4. Why does Sahara cry the night before school starts? What kinds of things is she thinking and feeling?**

Answers may mention that although Sahara doesn’t admit it to her mother, she could be nervous about starting school and repeating fifth grade. She’s been shy about meeting new people, as when she meets Paris at the library in Chapter 9, and she felt badly when other kids called her “Sahara Special” when she was in the Special Needs program the previous year (p. 5). Specifically Sahara wants to tell her mother “I’m too lonely,” and “I can’t do it,” but cannot bring herself to say it out loud (p. 32).

**5. At the beginning of the school year, why isn’t Sahara doing any of her assignments for Miss Pointy, even though she really likes her teacher?**

On pages 52-53, Sahara tries to think of what she should write in her journal, but can’t decide how to say what she wants to say. She thinks they “aren’t things that are important to know at school,” and that “all these things I know are a secret, I keep them inside myself, in a box made of myself. Only I seem to have lost the key and now I don’t know how to take it all out when I need it.” Answers may also include the fact that Sahara spends a lot of time wondering and imagining what other students are writing in their journals, instead of writing in her own, and that she needs to learn to believe in herself.

**6. Why do you think Sahara took Luz’s sticker? How does this incident affect her?**

Sahara hasn’t been given any stickers yet by Miss Pointy, and she is jealous of attention other students receive even though she herself is not doing work to merit a sticker. On page 86, she says “I just want a sticker, and I know she’d give me a thousand stickers if I would only do my work. But I’m not a begging dog. I can buy me all the stickers I want at the store.” After Sahara takes Luz’s sticker and Luz blames Paris, Sahara feels terrible. On pages 92-94, she lectures herself that there’s nothing heroic in what she’s done, and realizes that her classmates treat her well. She returns from recess and fills Miss Pointy’s “trouble basket” with her troubles, then puts her head down on her desk for the rest of the day.

**7. Sahara is writing a secret book of her own called *Heart-Wrenching Life Story and Amazing Adventures*. Do you know people who keep journals? Can you think of characters from other books you've read who have secret writings of their own? What are some reasons people might have private writings that they don't share with others?**

Answers will vary widely, and can include discussions of the private nature of diaries or how people can use writings to organize their thoughts or work out problems, or to write stories or poems they aren't ready to share with anyone else. Discussion may question when and if such "secret writings" should ever be shared with other people.

**8. What do you think is the most important thing Sahara needs to learn?**

Answers may include a discussion of how Sahara needs to learn to trust herself, to understand that being "good at looking at things and smelling things and seeing things and touching things and hearing things and thinking things and remembering things" (p. 53) are all great qualities for schoolwork. Other possible answers may be that she needs to do her work for her own satisfaction, that her file in the principal's office is not about who she really is, and that she needs to let go of the fact that her father is no longer around.

**9. When Miss Pointy visits Sahara's house, she says that she's there to bring homework. Why is she really there? And what is the effect of her visit on Sahara?**

In Chapter 9, Miss Pointy's visit is really to have a talk with Sahara's mother, to help her to understand that Sahara is indeed talented and smart and someone to be proud of. Miss Pointy tells Ms. Jones that she doesn't pay attention to school records, and that Sahara will be a writer. Ms. Jones is surprised, and pleased to know Miss Pointy thinks highly of Sahara. After the visit, Sahara realizes that in not trying at school, she's not failing other people, but failing herself. This is when she first decides to start doing her class assignments (p. 106).

**10. Why does Sahara think so much about Darrell Sikes? Why does she read his journal? Besides the fact that they were both in special education, what do they have in common? How are they different?**

Sahara and Darrell are very similar, in that each needs to learn how to participate in class better. Sahara misbehaves by not doing her work and not participating at all, while Darrell acts out and talks back. Sahara feels a special kinship with Darrell since she feels she's also been branded a bad student by the school. When she reads his journal, she is trying to understand him. They also both do not have fathers. Sahara knows that Darrell is better than many people think he is, that you "should not judge a book by its cover," and this is one reason she likes him.

**11. On the day she meets her new teacher, Sahara writes that Miss Pointy "looked less like a teacher and more like one of those burnt-out punk-rocker teenagers who hang out in front of the Dunkin' Donuts." Besides Miss Pointy's appearance, what is so unusual or surprising about her?**

From the first day, in hanging her diploma and putting the red table lamp on her desk (p. 39), Miss Pointy behaves differently. Sahara says she's never seen a teacher smile so openly before (p. 41) and that "She used big words and shot from the hip," (p. 45). She responds with humor when students such as Darrel act out or talk back, as when Darrel tells her to watch her back and she responds by asking him to watch it for her (pp. 46-47) or when he kicks her desk and she kicks his in return (pp. 59-60).

Answers may also include her disinterest in school records (p. 101), that she lies to keep Darrell from leaving class to receive special ed services (pp. 113-117), and that she gives Sahara her school file (p. 166).

**12. In the last chapter of the book, Sahara throws the letters to her father out the window. Why is this so important? If her father did contact her in the future, what do you think Sahara would say to him?**

Throughout the book, Sahara has been haunted by these letters, "those stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid letters that grew legs to follow me around," (p. 11). They've been in her file, branding her as strange, and she's been struggling with the idea that his leaving has something to do with her. Answers as to what Sahara may say to her father in the future may involve the letter Sahara mentally composes in the last chapter, which includes the line "I hope someday you're smart enough to be sorry, but if you're not, that's okay" (p. 170). She has come to realize that she is not responsible for his actions; she is only responsible for her own.

**13. Do you think Miss Pointy should be allowed to dress, talk, and act like she does? Should she be more "professional" in any way? Do schools have rules about how teachers should dress and behave? Can you imagine a teacher like Miss Pointy at your school?**

Answers will vary widely, and this will be a good opportunity for a discussion of whether it's possible to have too much "fun" in class, or whether structured work itself can also be fun. If Miss Pointy is considered "unprofessional" in some way, what would improve her behavior? Would these "improvements" actually hinder the job she does? An open discussion on rules and what they are meant to do may ensue.

**14. What parts of this book did you find humorous? Which of the characters make you laugh? Be prepared to talk about these parts of the book.**

Answers will be subjective, and may include Miss Pointy's behavior as a teacher and her surprising and unexpected responses to people. There is an opportunity to discuss what is funny in stories and in life and the reasons why.

**15. Sahara's mother requests that her daughter be removed from the special ed program, and Miss Pointy lies to keep Darrell Sikes from leaving class to receive special ed services. Why are these characters so critical about the special education program? Do you agree that these programs might cause more harm than good, or do you think that the services are valuable for students?**

There is a good opportunity here for open discussion of special education programs, and what is viewed by the students as good or bad about them, plus what they feel would

improve these efforts. The Special Needs teacher in Sahara's school seems to do little more than play board games with Sahara and Darrell (pp. 4-8). Is there something more that can or should be done? Sahara's mother feels that her daughter is capable of doing her work, and if she doesn't, then she should certainly "fail her like a normal kid" (p. 11). Are there ever circumstances when a student who doesn't do his or her work should not be failed? When Miss Pointy lies to keep Darrell in class, does this mean she has a better way to get through to him? Do these methods work?

*Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation 13-15.*

## Activities

**1. Miss Pointy's students are assigned to write about how they got their names. What do you know about your name? How did you get your name, and what does your name mean? Do you like your name? Does it fit you? If you could change it, what would you choose, and why? Write about your name.**

Students can also pick new names for themselves that display some aspect of their character, in the same way Sahara believes her own name is important (pp. 157-160). They could write these names down and put them in a hat, and as names are drawn, the class can guess whose "secret" name it is.

**2. Choose one of the scenes from Miss Pointy's classroom – a humorous or important one -- to make into a reader's theater or skit. Condense the scene if you want, assign roles, and practice reading your parts before you perform for the class. Afterward, explain why you chose the scene you did. What makes that scene funny or significant? What did you learn about the characters from reading their words aloud?**

There is room here for a discussion of the different ways to tell a story. Does a skit tell the story in the same way as a book? What does a book do that a skit doesn't? What does a skit do that a book doesn't?

**3. Using what you know from her story, imagine Sahara Jones twenty years in the future. What is she like, and what is she doing? Write a newspaper or magazine article about the grown-up Sahara Jones, giving us a glimpse into her adult life. Illustrate your article with a newspaper-style "photo" of Sahara.**

Students with a stronger interest in writing can partner with students more interested in illustrating. They can further discuss how these different ways of getting information across are both important, and what one can do that the other can't, and why.

**Other Books by This Author:** *Educating Esme: Diary of a Teacher's First Year* and *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading*, both published by Algonquin Books

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