



Sahara Special

Esmé Raji Codell

Teacher's Guide

Written By Laurie Rozakis, Ph.D.

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Synopsis

Chapter 1

Sahara Jones's parents have divorced and her father has not seen her since. Sahara writes a series of letters to her father, expressing her love. She stores the letters in her locker rather than mailing them. One day, the letters fall out of her locker in front of a teacher. The teacher turns them over to the school counselor, who locks them in the filing cabinet and assigns Sahara to work with a Special Needs teacher, whom Sahara dubs "Peaches." Recognizing the social stigma of being in Special Education, Sahara calls working with Peaches a fate equivalent to being "the street person of a school." As a result of this humiliation, Sahara stops doing her assignments. "Can't a woman get a divorce without her kid going special ed. on her?" her mother asks in exasperation. Sahara decides that she is really "Sahara Jones, Secret Writer" instead of "Sahara Special," a special education student. She intends to become a writer and tell what she calls her "Heart-Wrenching Life Story and Amazing Adventures." Meanwhile, Darrell Sikes, another Special Needs kid, is openly hostile as he rebels against his family problems and his learning deficiencies.

Chapter 2

Sahara's best friend is her cousin Rachel. Unlike Sahara, Rachel prefers television to reading. Also, Rachel is a follower who fits in with her peers, while Sahara is an individual who has no other friends. Rachel is especially close to Cordelia, who does not like Sahara.

Chapter 3

Sahara's mother is a waitress in a pancake house. When she is at work on the weekends, Sahara goes to her favorite place, the library. There, Sahara meets a girl her age named Paris. Sahara thinks they can be friends until the following week, when Paris brings a Spanish-looking girl with her. Later, we find out that this girl is another classmate, Luz. Sahara is too shy to approach them.

Chapter 4

Sahara is nervous about school because her mother has decided to have her repeat the fifth grade rather than being in Special Education. She enters the classroom, but there is no teacher—yet.

Chapter 5

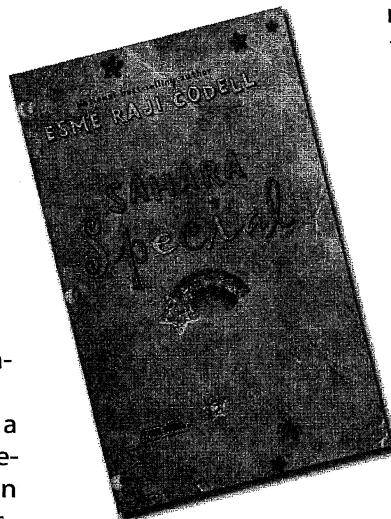
Sahara is shocked at her new teacher, Madame Poitier, who tells the students to call her "Miss Pointy." From her eggplant-colored lipstick, mane of wild hair, odd costumes, and the strange subjects she teaches (like "Puzzling" and "Time Travel"), Miss Pointy is like no other teacher Sahara has ever had. Miss Pointy starts by giving each student a notebook for their journal, explaining that they each owe her two dollars to cover the cost. She rearranges the seats and guides the kids to make up a list of class rules that all start with "Yes" rather than "No." Rather than writing in her journal, Sahara imagines what all the other kids are writing. She finally writes: "I am a writer." "I believe you," Miss Pointy writes back.

Chapter 6

Miss Pointy tells the students interesting stories and has them figure out the morals and themes. Sahara sneaks a look at Darrell's journal, even though it is forbidden to read another student's journal. His journal is filled with angry comments.

Chapter 7

Miss Pointy tells the class about George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. Darrell's mother bursts into the class and accuses Miss Pointy of calling her son a jackass in front of



everyone. When Miss Pointy coolly handles the situation and proves that she did not call Darrell a jackass, Darrell's mother smacks him. Miss Pointy has Darrell's mother removed from the class. Readers now understand how bad Darrell's home life is.

Chapter 8

In Sahara's journal, Miss Pointy writes: "Never kill off your characters, especially the bad ones. They should go on forever just like they do in real life" and "the main character is the one who changes." Meanwhile, Sahara is upset that all the other children have earned beautiful sparkly stickers. Some have even gotten special gifts, such as books. Sahara has received neither. Frustrated, Sahara steals a sticker from Luz's journal. She drops the sticker on the floor, and Paris picks it up. Paris takes the blame for the stolen sticker. Later, Paris confronts Sahara about the theft. Sahara is sad and upset because she realizes that she has spoiled any chance of being friends with Paris.

Chapter 9

When Sahara and Rachel are home with a stomach virus, Miss Pointy brings over their homework. When Ms. Jones tells Ms. Pointy about Sahara's previous special education placement, Miss Pointy is surprised because she has not read her files, or any of her students' files, for that matter. She prefers to make up her own mind about her students. Miss Pointy collects the two dollars for the journal and reassures Ms. Jones that she is an excellent mother and a "class act." Sahara writes a long, eloquent entry about her neighborhood.

Chapter 10

Miss Pointy shares some poetry with the children. Sahara especially likes the poem called "Autobiographia Literaria" by Frank O'Hara. Peaches, the special needs teacher, comes for Darrell but Miss Pointy lies and says that his mother no longer wants him to receive services. After class, Sahara tells Miss Pointy that she reads Darrell's journal. Although Miss Pointy is shocked and upset by Sahara's invasion of Darrell's privacy, she continues with her original plan, to praise Sahara's writing. She gives Sahara a sticker, the same type that Sahara stole from Luz. Sahara runs outside and gives the sticker to Paris.

Chapter 11

The next day, Miss Pointy tells a fairy-tale story

about a child who becomes a teacher. The story is a thinly-disguised parable about Darrell's potential as a student. Miss Pointy asks the kids to write about a wish. In her journal, Sahara writes that she wishes she could get the letters that she wrote to her father back, removed from the file. Paris and Luz forgive Sahara for having stolen Luz's sticker, and invite Sahara to join a club they are forming. Sahara is delighted.

Chapter 12

Sahara finally reads her journal entry to the class, in which she explains the origin of her name and her initial desire to change her name after her father left. The class is stunned by her talent and candor. Miss Pointy gets Sahara's file back and gives her a cactus as a gift.

Chapter 13

At home, Sahara reads the letters that she had written to her father. Sahara recites the Frank O'Hara poem for her mother. They cuddle.

Timeline of Milestones in Education

- 1635** The first Latin Grammar School (the Roxbury Latin School) is established. The first "free school" in Virginia opens.
- 1636** Harvard College, the first higher education institution in the New World, established in Cambridge, MA.
- 1642** The Massachusetts Bay School Law is passed, requiring parents to make sure their children know the principles of religion and the laws of the commonwealth.
- 1647** The Massachusetts Law of 1647 is passed, requiring that every town of at least 50 families hire a schoolmaster to teach the children to read and write, and that all towns of at least 100 families should have a Latin grammar school master who will prepare students to attend Harvard College.
- 1690** The first *New England Primer* is printed in Boston. It becomes the most widely-used schoolbook in New England.
- 1751** Franklin helps to establish the first "English Academy" in Philadelphia. The academy later becomes the University of Pennsylvania.

- 1779** Jefferson proposes a two-track educational system, with different tracks for "the laboring and the learned."
- 1785** Noah Webster writes *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*: a spelling book, a grammar book, and a reader. They become very widely used throughout the United States.
- 1817** The Connecticut Asylum at Hartford for the Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons opens. It is the first permanent school for the deaf in the U.S.
- 1821** First public high school, Boston English High School opens.
- 1827** Massachusetts passes a law requiring towns of more than 500 families to have a public high school open to all students.
- 1829** The New England Asylum for the Blind, now the Perkins School for the Blind, opens in MA, becoming the first school in the U.S. for children with visual disabilities.
- 1836** The first of William Holmes McGuffey's readers is published.
- 1837** Mount Holyoke Female Seminary opens. It is the first college for women in the U.S.
- 1839** The first state funded school specifically for teacher education (then known as "normal" schools) opens in Lexington, Massachusetts.
- 1848** Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Youth, the first school of its kind in the U.S., opens.
- 1851** The New York State Asylum for Idiots opens.
- 1852** Massachusetts enacts the first mandatory school attendance law.
- 1856** The first kindergarten in the U.S. is started in Watertown, Wisconsin.
- 1857** The National Teachers Association (now the National Education Association) is founded.
- 1862** The First Morrill Act donates public lands to states, the sale of which will be used for the "endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life."
- 1864** Gallaudet University, the first college specifically for deaf students, opens.
- 1881** Booker T. Washington becomes the first principal of the newly-opened normal school in Tuskegee, Alabama, now Tuskegee University.
- 1890** The Second Morrill Act is enacted, providing for the "more complete endowment and support of the colleges" through the sale of public lands." Part of this funding leads to the creation of 16 black colleges.
- 1916** The Stanford Revision of the Binet-Simon Scale becomes a widely-used individual intelligence test, and along with it, the concept of the intelligence quotient (IQ) is created.
- 1916** The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is founded.
- 1919** All states have laws providing funds for transporting children to school.
- 1926** The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is first administered.
- 1944** The G.I. Bill signed. Nearly 8 million World War II veterans take advantage of the GI Bill during the seven years benefits are offered. More than two million attend colleges or universities.
- 1952** Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952 modifies the G.I. Bill for veterans of the Korean War.
- 1954** *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, ruling that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."
- 1957** Federal troops enforce integration in Little Rock, Arkansas.

- 1963** Samuel A. Kirk uses the term "learning disability" at a Chicago conference on children with perceptual disorders. The term sticks, and in 1964, the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, now the Learning Disabilities Association of America, is formed. Today, more than one-half of all students in the U.S. who receive special education have been diagnosed as having learning disabilities.
- 1964** The Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion or national origin.
- 1965** The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed, providing federal funds to help low-income students. This results in educational programs such as Title I, Head Start, and bilingual education.
- 1966** Veterans Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966 provides educational benefits for Vietnam veterans.
- 1971** Federal court rules that students with mental retardation are entitled to a free public education.
- 1972** Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 becomes law, prohibiting discrimination based on sex in all aspects of education.
- 1975** The Education of All Handicapped Children Act passed, requiring a free, appropriate public education, suited to the student's individual needs, be offered in the least restrictive setting.
- 1990** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is passed, mandating transition services and adds autism and traumatic brain injury to the eligibility list.
- 2001** No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) becomes law, holding schools accountable for student achievement levels. The Act provides penalties for schools that do not make adequate yearly progress toward meeting the goals of NCLB.
- 2004** The Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act reauthorizes and modifies IDEA

Author Sketch

Esmé Raji Codell was born in 1968, in Chicago, Illinois. Her parents named her after the precocious J.D. Salinger character of the same name. Raji earned her degree from Northeastern Illinois University in 1992 and married Jim Pollock, an artist, three years later. They have one son.



After college, Codell took a position as a teacher in a Chicago inner city public school. Codell documented her experiences in her memoir *Educating Esmé: Diary of a Teacher's First Year*, focusing on the opposition which developed to her creative ways of teaching. Her methods closely mirror those of Miss Pointy in *Sahara Special*, including her wildly flowing hair, outrageous costumes, and creative projects. "Her fierce enthusiasm overflows the page," wrote *Booklist* reviewer GraceAnne A. DeCandido. The reading and math scores of Codell's students soared, and she was named the region's best new reading teacher, but she taught a self-contained classroom for only one year, after which she became a school librarian. An article in *People Weekly* quotes Codell as explaining her decision to leave the classroom this way: "I was tired. I didn't want to defend myself anymore."

Today, Codell has left teaching completely and produces Planet Esmé, an educational online site. She also addresses teachers across the country on reading and other educational issues.

Critic's Corner

Sahara Special, Codell's first novel, received generally good notices. *Kirkus*, *Publisher's Weekly*, and *School Library Journal* gave the novel starred reviews. Amazon.com also gave the book a "Highly Recommended" rating, noting that "Any child with a secret self (every child) will revel in Sahara's clear-sighted observations and sense of humor about a world that doesn't see who she really is."

However, Stephanie Zvirin, reviewing the novel for *Booklist*, conclude that "Codell works in wonderful metaphors and important life lessons, but that's not always enough to carry the peripatetic goings on, which come across as two parts message and one part story. An upbeat and certainly well-intentioned novel, but flawed."

Bibliography

- Booklist*, March 15, 1999, GraceAnne A. DeCandido, review of *Sahara Special*, p. 1263; May, 2003.
- Entertainment Weekly*, April 16, 1999, Megan Harlan, review of *Educating Esmé*, p. 54.
- Publishers Weekly*, April 2003, review of *Sahara Special*, p. 191.
- People Weekly*, October 4, 1999, Peter Ames Carlin and Kelly Williams, "Class Act: Spunky Chicago Educator Esmé Raji Codell Shares a Passion for Storytelling," p. 95.

General Objectives

1. To understand special education
2. To explore the effects of divorce on children
3. To assess each character's personality
4. To trace the sequence of events
5. To describe the causes and effects of Sahara's rebellion
6. To appreciate the author's humor
7. To probe the reasons for Darrell's fury
8. To understand how Sahara matures
9. To recognize the significance of setting
10. To describe Miss Pointy's teaching methods

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze why Sahara writes letters to her absent father but does not mail them
2. To understand why reading is so important to Sahara
3. To understand the double meaning of novel's title
4. To probe the effects of special education placement
5. To understand why Sahara refuses to participate in class
6. To analyze why Sahara does not have friends
7. To grasp why Sahara steals Luz's sticker
8. To debate the effectiveness and legality of Miss Pointy's teaching methods
9. To understand the author's message
10. To decide whether the novel's resolution is logical

Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Esmé Raji Codell's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

humor parts of a story that are funny. Humor can be created through sarcasm, word play, irony, and exaggeration. Codell creates humor most often by creative comparisons. For example, Sahara notes that Darrell has been in special ed. "since dinosaurs roamed the earth, or at least since the Declaration of Independence was signed." She also uses sarcasm, as in this comment by Sahara's mother: "Can't a woman get a divorce without her kid going special ed. on her?"

description a word picture of what something or someone is like. Description is made up of sensory details that help readers form pictures in their minds. Codell uses description in *Sahara Special* to help readers visualize the characters. This is evident from Codell's description of Miss Pointy, for instance: "Her hair was copper like a lucky penny, but when the light hit it a certain way, it seemed almost green, a deep green, like she colored it with a dye made from tree leaves. It was held back with sparkling dragonfly barrettes, but there was no help for it. It was wild hair. She was pale, but I couldn't decide for sure if she was white or Asian or Puerto Rican, or maybe a light-skinned black. When someone is wearing lipstick as purple as an eggplant, it's hard to tell." We see that Miss Pointy is a colorful, creative free spirit.

conflict in literature is a struggle or fight. There are two kinds of conflict. In an external conflict, characters struggle against a force outside themselves. In an internal conflict, characters battle a force within themselves. *Sahara Special* has a strong external conflict as Miss Pointy and Darrell struggle in the classroom. In addition, Sahara's mother has a conflict with the school administration; Sahara has a conflict with Paris as well. There are also a series of internal conflicts, most especially shown by Sahara's struggle to grow up and recover from her father's desertion.

Other Works by Esmé Raji Codell

Diary of a Fairy Godmother, 2005

Educating Esmé: Diary of a Teacher's First Year, 1999.

How to Get Your Child to Love Reading: For Ravenous and Reluctant Readers, 2003

The Importance of Setting

Sahara Special is set in the Chicago ghetto. According to the latest census, there are 308,200 families living in Chicago categorized as extremely low-income renters (i.e. a family of four making between \$0 and \$19,050 a year). Between 99,300 and 104,800 renter households in Chicago live in substandard housing. Sahara is one of them. She explains in a journal essay that it must be nice not to hear sirens, blaring music, and your neighbors yelling. She dreams of living in the country and being able to look out the window and see the Milky Way. Sahara rarely plays outside because it is too dangerous. The ghetto lacks the recreational amenities that the suburbs boast, like pools and the beach. "I can't swim on concrete," she says.

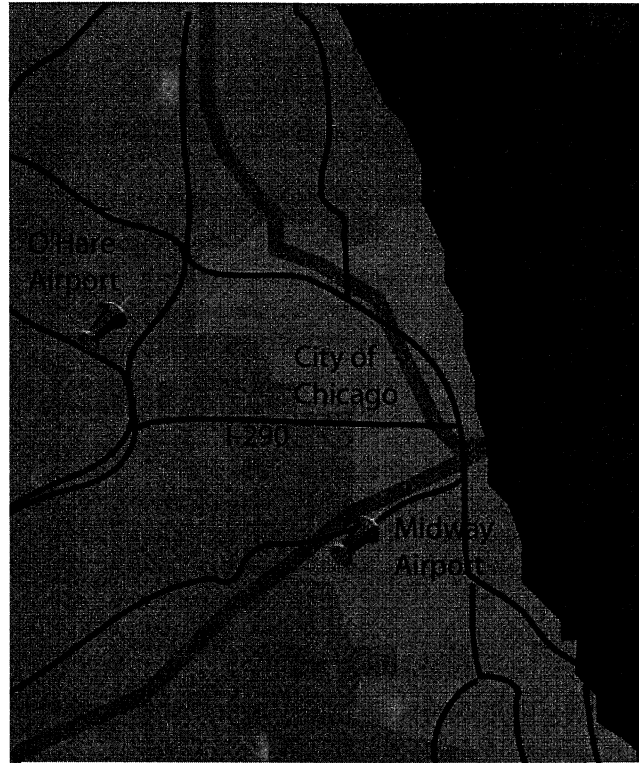
The dismal history of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) includes decades of mediocre policy decisions resulting in concentrated poverty and substandard housing options. Beginning in the late 1930s, after the passage of the National Housing Act, Chicago began building public housing units for its most impoverished citizens. As the decades passed, the number of these units increased. More African-Americans moved in. These high-rises created neighborhoods and communities, but many of Chicago's high-rise tenements are inhospitable environs that house a disproportionate share of the city's social ills, including high crime rates, unemployment, and family instability.

The Gautreaux legislation, beginning in the late 1960s, changed the CHA. The Gautreaux case, which pitted 40,000 Chicago Public Housing residents against the CHA and later HUD, determined that the CHA practiced racial discrimination in its housing policies. However, while relocation programs appear to solve problems of crime and violence, they often relocate many people against their will, placing them in unfamiliar communities that may be no safer than the ones from which the residents came.

The courts ordered CHA and later HUD to develop new housing policies that would integrate races and social classes. Subsequent programs relocated some inner city minorities to white areas surrounding the city. Some of these policies achieved limited success, but they also created many new problems for public housing residents. While many resi-

dents welcomed the chance to move out of their crumbling and filthy buildings, they were reluctant to abandon their communities.

Cross-Curricular Sources



Books

Joan Bauer, *Hope Was Here*
Beverly Cleary, *Beezus and Ramona*
Beverly Cleary, *Henry Huggins*
Beverly Cleary, *Sister of the Bride*
Beverly Cleary, *Ramona the Pest*
Beverly Cleary, *Ramona the Brave*
Meg Cabot, *The Princess Diaries, Shadowland*
Andrew Clemens, *The School Story*
Sarah Dessen, *Dreamland*
Kate DiCamillo, *Because of Winn-Dixie*
Patricia Reilly Giff, *Pictures of Hollis Woods*
Carl Hiaasen, *Hoot*
E. L. Konigsburg, *Silent to the Bone*
Louise Rennison, *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging*
Jerry Spinelli, *Loser*
Beatriz Vida, *A Library for Juana*
Jacqueline Woodson, *If You Come Softly*

DVDs and Videos

The Breakfast Club
Pretty in Pink
Sixteen Candles
St. Elmo's Fire
Ten Things I Hate About You

Audio

Sahara Special (Audiofile)
Educating Esmé: Diary of a Teacher's First Year
 (HighBridge)
Educating Esmé: Diary of a Teacher's First Year: portions aired as part of *Life Stories*, produced by radio station WBEZ, Chicago, IL.

Internet

Planet Esmé
<http://www.planetesme.com/>
 The Story Behind Sahara Special
http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com/lit_resources/authors/stories_behind/storycodell.html
 Esmé Raji Codell Expounds on the Potato
news.bookweb.org/features/1771.html
 A Moment with Esmé Raji Codell
seattlepi.nwsourc.com/books/144348_moment18.html
 Teachers.Net Meeting
teachers.net/archive/codell.html

Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Esmé Raji Codell's *Sahara Special* should include these aspects:

Themes

- school
- special education
- divorce
- creativity
- reading
- parental love
- fitting in
- writing
- rewards
- coping skills

Motifs

- dealing with the pain of being rejected by a parent
- being placed in special education
- feeling ostracized by your peers
- trying to make friends
- learning from a creative teacher
- reading and writing for pleasure
- maturing and becoming more self-assured
- discovering hidden talents
- making friends and being accepted
- staying close to your mother

Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the book. Explain the meaning of each. Chapter and page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. People from my class would hiss, "Hi, Sahara Special" as they passed to go to the wash-room, and don't think they meant special like a princess or a movie star or something sparkly like that. (Chap. 1, p. 5)
(This passage explains the title: Sahara is special because she has been placed in Special Education. This causes her to be treated with pity and even contempt by her fellow students, as we see here. However, as the book progresses, Sahara becomes special for her writing ability and growing maturity. Thus, the title has a dual meaning.)
2. I wanted to see, because I wanted to be like Miss Pointy, a woman who loved stories even better than TV. (Chap. 7, p. 71)
(Sahara very much admires Miss Pointy for her love of language over television, her eccentric style, and her obvious respect for her students. Codell is suggesting that a teacher's passion for her job is a key element in classroom success.)
3. Miss Pointy was looking at me, too, tenderly, like a mother who doesn't need her child to prove anything, but is just glad to know what the child is made of. (Chap 7, p. 72)
(Here, Sahara proves that she is intelligent and does not belong in special education. Miss Pointy's approval and awareness of her intelligence is very important to Sahara.)

4. "Cordelia told me you were bad, but I didn't believe her." (Chap 8, p. 92)
(Paris is furious when Sahara steals a sticker from Luz's notebook. Sahara is crushed at her foolish act because she had wanted to be friends with Paris.)
5. "Uuggghh," she grunted, holding her stomach. "I think I have impulse control issues." (Chap 10, p. 118)
(Miss Pointy refuses to let Darrell go to special education. Her refusal swings Darrell to her side and enables him to mature and manage his behavior. However, this incident is very unrealistic because it would open Miss Pointy and the school to litigation, since special education placement is governed by federal mandate.)
6. "What?" asked Paris. I took her hand and slipped the sticker inside, secret-like. (Chap 10, p. 121)
(By giving Paris the new sticker to give to Luz, Sahara has redeemed herself for stealing Luz's sticker and harming the friendship between Paris and Luz. Sahara's act here is a milestone in her maturity.)
7. "You gave me an apple every day, and now I will give an apple to you." (Chap 11, p. 139)
(Miss Pointy concludes a fable this way, taking an apple off her desk and putting it on Darrell's desk. In so doing, she is saying that Darrell has the potential to become a teacher, or anything he desires. This affirmation, although unrealistic, helps Darrell concentrate on his studies and succeed.)
8. "And I know you like books. So we were wondering if you'd like to be in it," said Paris. (Chap.11, p. 147)
(Paris and Luz start a club and invite Sahara to be a member. Since the club includes only these three girls, the invitation is a great honor. It means that the girls have forgiven Sahara for the sticker theft and want to be friends with her. These are her first non-relative friends. She is thrilled to be accepted by her peers.)

9. There was a small cactus in a pot, with a beautiful red flower in bloom at the top. (Chap. 12, p. 166)
(Sahara had wished to get the letters she wrote to her father but never mailed returned. Miss Pointy not only fulfills this wish, but also gives Sahara a special gift: a cactus. It is a symbol for Sahara: prickly, but also tough and beautiful.)
10. Miss Pointy says the main character is the one who changes. (Chap. 13, p. 169)
(And indeed Sahara has changed. When the story began, she was a confused, isolated, and lonely child. By the end, she is assured of her writing talent, part of the class, and no longer lonely. She has made enormous progress in a very short time.)

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. Why does Sahara write letters to her father?
(Her parents have gotten divorced and she misses him.)
2. Why is Sahara placed in Special Needs?
(She is not doing her work.)
3. What incentive does Miss Pointy give her students to encourage their participation?
(She gives them shiny stickers.)
4. Why does Sahara repeat the fifth grade?
(Her mother would rather that she repeats the grade than be in Special Education and suffer the stigma it carries for many people.)
5. What two gifts does Miss Pointy leave in the locker for Sahara?
(Miss Pointy leaves the letters Sahara wrote and a cactus.)

Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. In what two ways is Sahara special?
(She is special because she is in "special" education. She is also special because she has unique writing talent and a keen intelligence.)

7. Why does Sahara steal Luz's sticker?
(Although the theft is committed on impulse, Sahara is bitterly jealous of Luz because Luz is friends with Paris. She is also jealous because Luz has so many stickers and Sahara has none. Thus, the theft is done in spite and envy.)
8. How does Sahara change over the course of the novel?
(She learns to deal with the divorce and her father's desertion. She learns to express herself in class and use her writing talent. She learns to get along with her peers.)

Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. Do you think that Miss Pointy is a believable character? Why or why not?
(No, because she is too eccentric and the students would never accept her outlandish behavior, such as her tiara. Further, the administration would force her to give standardized tests and teach to the tests. Yes, because education does attract such caring, dedicated, and unique people every now and again.)
10. Do you think the author's message about education overpowers the story? Explain.
(The novel has been criticized for being more a polemic than a story. Some students may agree, while those who got absorbed in the characterization and details overlooked the didactic message.)

Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

11. Hold a roundtable discussion in which you discuss the qualities that make someone an effective teacher. Consider how such teachers help prepare their students for life as well as school.
12. Perform one of the scenes from the novel, such as the scene where Paris and Luz invite Sahara to join their new club.

Across the Curriculum

Art/Music

- Miss Pointy gives her students beautiful stickers to mark their accomplishments. Make some stickers to share with your classmates. Give at least one sticker to each classmate to acknowledge something positive they do.
- The character Paris McCray is named after the "City of Lights." Make a travel brochure to entice people to visit this famous city.
- Draw or paint a new cover for the novel.
- Choose the music that Sahara would likely enjoy listening to while she is reading.
- On the first day, Miss Pointy has the students write the class rules. Make a poster with rules for your class. Start each rule with "Yes" rather than "No."

Language Arts

- On her webpage, Codell noted: "I was inspired to write *Sahara Special* because I left teaching to write full time, and I missed the children." List the five things about teaching that you think she missed the most.
- Miss Pointy refers to Beverly Cleary. Read one of Cleary's books and explain how they fit with Sahara's situation in the novel.
- Sahara loves to read. List your five favorite books. Next to each book, write a sentence explaining why you would recommend it to others.
- Sahara vows to write "The Heart-Wrenching Life Story and Amazing Adventures" of her life. Write a chapter in your life story, dramatizing it as Sahara intends to do to her own.
- Read one of Aesop's fables. Then write a fable of your own. You may use the same moral or write a new moral that better matches your fable.

History/Social Studies

1. Find out how a child gets placed into special education. What is the legal classification process? Share your research with the class.
2. Miss Pointy asks her students to write about their wishes. Sahara, for instance, wishes to have the letters she wrote to her father returned to her. Write your three wishes. Next to each wish, explain why it is important to you.
3. Report on the Sahara desert.
4. Learn how to double-dutch jump rope, as Sahara likes to do. Demonstrate the sport for your classmates and explain its history.
5. Sahara refers to King Kong. Who was King Kong? Find out and share your information with your class on a visual display.

Science/Math

1. Make a chart or graph comparing the number of families with fathers to those without fathers. Then state these statistics in several other ways, such as percentages.
2. Sahara notes that Darrell has been in special ed. "since dinosaurs roamed the earth, or at least since the Declaration of Independence was signed." Make a timeline showing the relationship of these two events. Include at least ten other events in between.
3. Sahara loves pancakes. Find out what vitamins, minerals, and calories are in pancakes. Are they a healthful snack or not?
4. Sahara and Rachel get a virus. Reread the section of the book that describes their symptoms and how Ms. Jones treats these symptoms. Then make a pamphlet explaining how to diagnose and treat simple stomach viruses.

Speech/Drama

1. Working with a group of classmates, debate whether or not Miss Pointy is a good teacher.
2. Miss Pointy refuses to send Darrell to special education class. In a speech, argue that this was or was not a good thing to do.

3. Create a club as Paris and Luz do. Invite the entire class to join.
4. Peaches plays board games with Sahara. Play some classic board games with a classmate or two.
5. Paris says, "School is a powerful place where things change and wishes come true." In a speech, agree or disagree with her statement.

Alternate Assessment

1. Miss Pointy does not read her students' files because she does not want to form preconceived notions about them. She would rather judge them herself. With some classmates, agree or disagree with her policy.
2. Write a review of the novel, explaining why you would or would not recommend it to a friend.
3. Write the next chapter in *Sahara Special*. Tell what happens to Sahara.

Vocabulary

Complete each sentence with the correct vocabulary word from the word box. You will have words left over.

thespian	sluggish	mandated	shanty	calculus
idyllic	debacle	illegible	intrude	pungent
cynics	bureaucrats	sluggish	alliances	cantering

1. The _____ odor of cooking cabbage lingered in the hall for days.
2. Only _____ don't cry at the end of a sentimental movie like *"It's a Wonderful Life."*
3. Doctors usually have _____ handwriting, but Dr. Lui's writing is clear and easy to read.
4. The state _____ end-of the year exams for graduation, so everyone had to take the tests.
5. The horse was _____ in the woods, moving at a brisk pace.
6. The _____ water barely moved in the weed-choked canal.
7. The broken-down _____ in the woods housed a few birds and mice.
8. The _____ took many acting classes before making her debut on Broadway.
9. The seniors studied _____ in math class.
10. The picnic became a total _____ after the ants took over!
11. You should stay away and not _____ when people are having a private conversation.
12. What could be more perfect and _____ than spending the afternoon drifting down the river on a boat?

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

Match each description with a name from the list. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at the left of each number.

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------|
| A. Sahara | F. Peaches |
| B. Rachel Wells | G. Darrell Sikes |
| C. Mrs. Rosen | H. Miss Pointy |
| D. Mr. Stinger | I. Luz |
| E. Ms. Jones | J. Paris McCray |

- ___ 1. The neighbor who watches out for Sahara
- ___ 2. Sahara's mother; she works in a pancake restaurant
- ___ 3. The girl Sahara meets in the library
- ___ 4. The Special Needs teacher
- ___ 5. The school counselor
- ___ 6. The novel's first-person narrator
- ___ 7. Sahara's eccentric teacher
- ___ 8. The classmate with the largest collection of stickers
- ___ 9. Sahara's angry classmate, also in Special Needs
- ___ 10. Sahara's cousin and friend

Part II: Identification (20 points)

Briefly describe each person, place, or thing and explain why it is important in the story.

- 1. the star sticker
- 2. the library
- 3. pancakes
- 4. the cactus
- 5. Frank O'Hara

Comprehension Test A (Page 2)

Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if all or part of the statement is false.

- 1. Sahara writes a series of letters to her former boyfriend, expressing her love. She stores the letters in her locker rather than mailing them.
- 2. She gets into trouble for harassing her former boyfriend.
- 3. Sahara decides that she is going to be a writer when she grows up.
- 4. Ms. Jones is willing to buy Sahara any book she wants, just as she would buy milk, eggs, and other necessities.
- 5. Sahara is nervous about school because her mother has decided to have her repeat the fifth grade rather than being in Special Education.
- 6. Miss Pointy got her nickname from her long, pointy nose.
- 7. Miss Pointy says that she is going to teach strange subjects, including "Puzzling" and "Time Travel."
- 8. Miss Pointy buys each child a journal for two dollars and refuses to accept the money from them.
- 9. Sahara is upset that all the other children have earned beautiful sparkly stickers and she never earns even one.
- 10. Miss Pointy gives Darrell an apple from her desk.

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. Explain what Sahara learned from Miss Pointy.
- 2. Summarize the events in *Sahara Special*.
- 3. Argue that the novel's ending was or was not logical.
- 4. Write a letter that Sahara might send to her father at the end of the novel.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Sentence Completion (20 points)

Write in the term that best completes each of the following statements.

1. Sahara writes a series of **(e-mails, letters)** to her father, expressing her love.
2. Sahara's favorite past-time is **(reading, jumping rope)**.
3. "Sahara Special" decides that she is really "Sahara Jones, Secret **(Agent, Writer)**."
4. Sahara's mother is a waitress in a **(pancake, steak)** restaurant.
5. Miss Pointy's real name is Madame **(Polley, Poitier)**.
6. Miss Pointy teaches strange subjects like "Puzzling" and "Time Travel," and gives each student a special **(pen, notebook)**.
7. Miss Pointy tells the class about **(Abraham Lincoln, George Washington)** and the cherry tree.
8. Darrell's **(father, mother)** comes roaring into the classroom and hits Darrell.
9. Sahara is upset that all the other children have earned beautiful sparkly **(stickers, posters)**.
10. Miss Pointy gets Sahara's file back and gives her a **(plant, book)** as a gift.

Part II: Identification (20 points)

Briefly describe each person, place, or thing and explain why it is important in the story.

1. journals
2. The letter P in a circle with a slash across it
3. stickers
4. fables
5. the cactus

Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

Part III: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left. Use each name only once.

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| ___ 1. Darrell Sikes | A. Rachel's friend; she does not like Sahara |
| ___ 2. Rachel Wells | B. Sahara's neighbor |
| ___ 3. Sahara Special | C. the special needs teacher |
| ___ 4. Mrs. Rosen | D. Miss Pointy, Sahara's teacher |
| ___ 5. Esmé Raji Codell | E. Sahara's cousin and friend |
| ___ 6. Paris McCray | F. the class troublemaker |
| ___ 7. Luz | G. The girl with the largest collection of sparkly stickers |
| ___ 8. Cordelia | H. the novel's first-person narrator |
| ___ 9. Madame Poitier | I. the author of Sahara Special |
| ___ 10. Peaches | J. The girl whom Sahara meets in the library |

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Codell called this book *Sahara Special*. Explain two ways that Sahara is special.
2. Compare and contrast Miss Pointy to your teachers. Show how she is the same or different.
3. Analyze how Sahara changes from the beginning to the end of the novel.
4. Explain why you would or would not like to be in Miss Pointy's class.

Answer Key

VOCABULARY

- | | | |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| 1. pungent | 5. cantering | 9. calculus |
| 2. cynics | 6. sluggish | 10. debacle |
| 3. illegible | 7. shanty | 11. intrude |
| 4. mandated | 8. thespian | 12. idyllic |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. A |
| 2. E | 7. H |
| 3. J | 8. I |
| 4. F | 9. G |
| 5. D | 10. B |

Part II: Identification (20 points)

- Sahara peels the star sticker from Luz's notebook. She drops it on the floor. Miss Pointy gives her another one, which she gives to Paris to give to Luz. By making amends this way, the girls all become friends.
- The library is Sahara's favorite place because she loves to read.
- Sahara's mother works in a pancake restaurant, a job that Sahara finds appealing because her mother is able to get Sahara free pancakes.
- The cactus is the gift that Miss Pointy leaves for Sahara in the locker, along with the file of letters that Sahara wrote to her father but never mailed. The cactus symbolizes Sahara, because it not only survives but also flourishes in difficult conditions.
- Frank O'Hara wrote the poem that Sahara feels expresses her own feelings and approach to the world.

Part III: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. F |
| 2. F | 7. T |
| 3. T | 8. F |
| 4. T | 9. F |
| 5. T | 10. T |

Part IV. Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Sentence Completion (20 points)

- | | |
|------------|----------------------|
| 1. letters | 6. notebook |
| 2. reading | 7. George Washington |
| 3. Writer | 8. mother |
| 4. pancake | 9. stickers |
| 5. Poitier | 10. plant |

Part II: Identification (20 points)

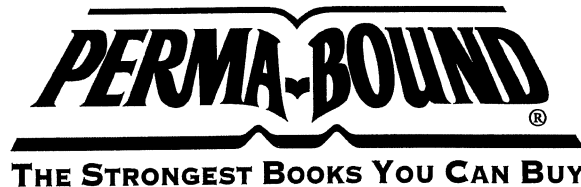
- Miss Pointy gives each student a journal on the first day of class and expects them to pay for it. She has them write in their journals daily, reads what they have written, and comments on it.
- The letter P in a circle with a slash across it is Miss Pointy's symbol for a private entry in a journal.
- Miss Pointy gives the students beautiful sparkly stickers to reward their good comments and effort.
- Miss Pointy reads fables to her students. She guides them to find the moral in each and apply this skill to all the literature they read and hear. She also guides them to apply the morals to their own life.
- The cactus is the gift that Miss Pointy leaves for Sahara in the locker, along with the file of letters that Sahara wrote to her father but never mailed. The cactus symbolizes Sahara, because it not only survives but also flourishes in difficult conditions.

Part III: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. J |
| 2. E | 7. G |
| 3. H | 8. A |
| 4. B | 9. D |
| 5. I | 10. C |

Part IV. Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.



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