



A Standards-Aligned Educator Guide for Grades 3 – 7

# SINCERELY SICILY

## About the book:

Black Panamanian fashionista who rocks her braids with pride Sicily Jordan's, worst nightmare has come true! She's been enrolled in a new school, with zero of her friends and stuck wearing a fashion catastrophe of a uniform. But however bad Sicily thought sixth grade was going to be, it only gets worse when she does her class presentation.

While all her classmates breezed through theirs, Sicily is bombarded with questions on how she can be both Black and Panamanian. She wants people to understand, but it doesn't feel like anyone is ready to listen—first at school and then at home. Because when her abuela starts talking mess about her braids, Sicily's the only one whose heart is being crumpled for a second time.

Staying quiet may no longer be an option, but that doesn't mean Sicily has the words to show the world just what it means to be a proud Black Panamanian either. Even though she hasn't written in her journal since her abuelo passed, it's time to pick up her pen again—but will it be enough to prove to herself and everyone else exactly who she is?

**Age Range:** 8 - 12 years

**Grade Level:** 3 - 7

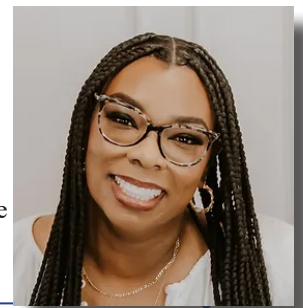
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## About the Author:

Tamika Burgess (Ta-mee-Ka Bur-jess) is a storyteller with over a decade of novel, TV/film, and personal essay writing experience. Born to parents who migrated from Panamá, Tamika has always taken a particular interest in writing themes that explore her Black Latina identity. Because of her passion for spreading the knowledge of Black Panamanian culture, Tamika has been featured on various websites, podcasts, and panels. When she is not writing, Tamika is somewhere cozy online shopping and listening to a podcast. Tamika resides in sunny Southern California. Learn more about Tamika at [TamikaBurgess.com](http://TamikaBurgess.com).



## Pre-Reading Discussion:

- Consider the illustration on the cover of the book. List the clues that suggest what the girl's personality might be like.
- Read the title of the book. The word *sincerely* has two meanings, one being used as a salutation in letter writing. The other as a synonym for *truthfulness*, *honesty*, and *earnestly*. Speculate how each connotation of the word *sincerely* might be explored in the story. Explain your answer.
- Examine the phrase "Change begins at the end of her pen." Determine how the phrase connects with the girl seated on the bench.
- Predict what the story is going to be about.

## Post-Reading Discussion:

*I've heard people say that after you do something once, it gets easier the more you do it. When it comes to day two at my new school, that's not the case (pg. 43).*

- The word *identity* means individuality, uniqueness, and selfhood. Consider how being forced to attend Shirley Chisholm Middle School rather than Ravenwood Middle School impacted Sicily's sense of identity. Identify reasons why this is so.
- At the onset of the story, Sicily found comfort and connectedness in her relationship with Abuela. They once shared a special bond of understanding and oneness. Consider how Abuela's insults regarding braids affected Sicily's fragile feelings of confidence in this scene.
- Explain why Sicily seems reserved and withdrawn in the new school setting.
- How does Sicily's need to relate to others affect her identity? Does she even have an identity at Shirley Chisholm Middle School in this scene? Explain your answer.

## Post-Reading Discussion continued:

And what about Panamá? Were Black people there also treated like this back in the day? I mean. Can I create the same timeline for Panamá too (pg. 124)?

"Listen to me," Pa cuts her off. By the tone of his voice, I can tell he has had enough of this. "This world is very harsh to Black women, and you know that. At some point in Sicily's life, people will speak negatively about her simply because of the color of her skin or her features (pg. 160)."

While I always knew Abuelo enjoyed writing, I never knew there was a specific reason for why he did it. Reading Abuelo's words has been like having a conversation with him, even though he's no longer here (pg. 252).

- As the story progresses, Sicily learns that her people were enslaved. The history of the Panamanian people reveals centuries of harsh treatment, as well as a deep and solid commitment to family, tradition, and creative artistic expression. Determine how understanding her cultural background empowers Sicily's individuality and identity.
- Sicily's grandfather acknowledged her gift of writing long before she was aware of it. Writers possess a distinct uniqueness all their own. They tend to be creative and expressive, yet deeply thoughtful and introspective. Analyze Sicily's character. Identify the traits of a writer, those that only Abuelo could recognize.
- Consider how the role of becoming a writer develops Sicily's character throughout the plot line.
- The word *race* is defined as an ethnic group of people who share comparative and physical qualities. The term *racism* relates to discrimination or antagonism on the basis of membership in a particular racial or ethnic group. Which connotation of terms is Pa referencing the statement to the left? Explain your answer.
- In this scene, Abuela seems resistant to accepting Pa's reasoning. Why? Could it be that her experiences with race vs. racism are different from his? Or Sicily's? How so?
- Eventually, Sicily learns about the rich cultural history behind the art of braids. She learns that the various braided hairstyles were cultural symbols of religion, identity, and status among ancestors. Explain how this elevates her appreciation for her race and bolsters her against the injustice of racism.
- Examine the phrase featured on the cover of the book that reads, "Change begins at the end of her pen." Identify the change taking place in Sicily as she trusts in and appreciates her gift of writing, an inheritance from her grandfather.
- The word *culture* relates to the traditions, values, achievements, customs, and heritage of a particular nation or people. Tell how embracing her rich Panamanian history and culture served to empower Sicily to become all that she is meant to be.

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## THE BIO-PYRAMID RESEARCH PROJECT

The Bio-Pyramid is a research tool designed to summarize facts about a person's life. It contains six lines to be filled with specific details reflecting aspects of the researched individual's life. Use the template below as a guide to research the life of one of the accomplished Panamanian individuals listed below. Use the information gathered in the research to write an informative essay exploring how identity, race, and culture contributed to their ultimate success. Share your Bio-Pyramid and essay with the class.



Bayano | Panama Al Brown | Tatyana Ali | Sech | Tamika Burgess  
Brenda Smith | Gwendolyn Ifill | Antonio Jose Guzman | Margarita Henriquez  
Roberto Durán | Aaron Zebede | Llyod La Beach | Omar Torrijos | Shoshana Johnson  
Mireya Moscoso | Isabel Saint Malo | Joey Montana  
John Isaacs | José Quintero | Roque Cordero | Ricardo Miró

## COMMON CORE STATE ANCHOR STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

Reading: CCRA-R.1, R.2, R.3, R.4, R.7, R.8, R.10

Writing: CCRA-W.1, W.4, W.5, W.7, W.9

Speaking & Listening: CCRA-SL.1, SL.2, SL.4, SL.6

Language: CCRA-L.1, L.2, L.4





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Person's name

\_\_\_\_\_

Two words describing the person

\_\_\_\_\_

Three words describing the person's childhood

\_\_\_\_\_

Four words describing a problem the person had to overcome

\_\_\_\_\_

Five words describing one of their life accomplishments

\_\_\_\_\_

Six words stating how the world has benefited from their accomplishments