

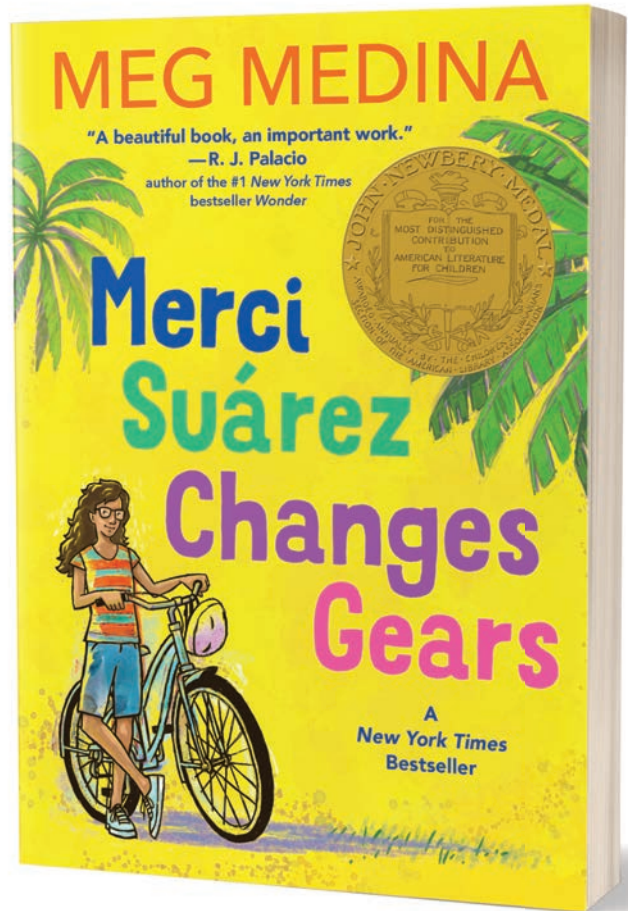
# Merci Suárez Changes Gears

## Teachers' Guide

### About the Book

Merci Suárez knew that sixth grade would be different, but she had no idea just how different. For starters, Merci has never been like the other kids at her private school in Florida, because she and her older brother, Roli, are scholarship students. They don't have a big house or a fancy boat, and they have to do extra community service to make up for their free tuition. So when bossy Edna Santos sets her sights on the new boy who happens to be Merci's school-assigned Sunshine Buddy, Merci becomes the target of Edna's jealousy. Things aren't going well at home, either: Merci's grandfather and most trusted ally, Lolo, has been acting strangely lately — forgetting important things, falling from his bike, and getting angry over nothing. No one in her family will tell Merci what's going on, so she's left to her own worries, while also feeling all on her own at school. In a coming-of-age tale full of humor and wisdom, award-winning author Meg Medina gets to the heart of the confusion and constant change that define middle school — and the steadfast connection that defines family.

- ★ **“A must read.”** —*Booklist* (starred review)
- ★ **“Medina delivers another stellar and deeply moving story.”** —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)
- ★ **“A luminous middle-grade novel.”**  
—*School Library Journal* (starred review)
- ★ **“Medina writes with sincerity and humor.”**  
—*The Horn Book* (starred review)
- ★ **“A warmly told story.”** —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)



**Winner of the  
2019 Newbery Medal  
A Kirkus Prize Finalist  
5 starred reviews!**

## Discussion Questions

Use these questions for reading check-ins, writing prompts, or classroom discussions.

### COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

These questions correlate to ELA Reading Standards for Literature: Key Ideas and Details RL.4–7.1, RL.4–7.3; Craft and Structure RL.4–7.6; and Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity RL.4–7.10.

1. Merci is dealing with a lot of change. One of her biggest struggles is the transition from elementary school to middle school. What are some of the problems this change causes? How does Merci deal with them? What are some examples of struggles you've faced in school as you've grown up?
2. Merci is often told that she asks too many questions. Do you think someone can ask too many questions? What does Merci's questioning tell us about her character?
3. Merci has been on both sides of the Sunshine Buddies program, which helps new students get used to their new school. Do you believe this group helped Merci? Did it help Michael? What do you think students need when they start at a new school? What are some ways the Sunshine Buddies system could be revamped to better help new students?
4. Throughout the book, Merci is asked to work in pairs or collaborative groups for school activities. What are the positives and negatives of working with others at school? Use specific examples from the text to support your statements.
5. At the movies, Merci shows everyone her bitmoji decked out with swag from her favorite movie. If you were to create a bitmoji for each of the characters in the novel, what would each one wear, and what accessories would it have? What would your bitmoji look like? Explain your choices.
6. Merci learns that everyone in her family knew of Lolo's Alzheimer's but kept it from her. Why did her family choose not to tell her? Do you believe they should have let her know earlier? Why?
7. Roli gets into his first-choice college and even receives a scholarship to attend. But when he first tells Merci, his reaction isn't particularly celebratory. Why wasn't Roli as happy at that moment as one might expect?
8. Merci has one career goal: to run her father's business, Sol Painting. What steps is she already taking to prepare for it? What are some things she says that show how serious she is about this goal? Her family doesn't necessarily want Sol Painting to be Merci's career, even though they are proud of it. Why wouldn't they want her to run the family business when she is older? What are some ways her family tries to dissuade her from this dream?
9. How does Merci's not being able to try out for soccer change the trajectory of the plot? Where do you think it would have headed if she had been able to try out?
10. Merci attends a private school that asks its families to donate to fundraisers in addition to paying tuition. How are fundraisers at any school a tough situation for students who have families that struggle economically?
11. Both Edna and Merci are required to write apology letters. Why would Miss McDaniels require letters instead of other forms of apology? What are the pros of letter writing?
12. We meet many adults at Merci's school throughout the book, including Ms. Tannenbaum, who strives to make education and school special. Other than Ms. Tannenbaum, which adult at school makes the biggest difference in Merci's life? Give examples to support your answer. What teachers or adults have made education and school special for you?
13. Assumptions people make based on income and appearance are mentioned several times in the novel (for example, on pages 143–44 and 230). Merci's parents frequently remind her that she must be perceived as a responsible and

serious member of society and her school, such as on pages 5 and 174. How might society and particularly people at her school perceive Merci's family, and how does that perception compare to the reality that you know after reading the story?

14. Edna seems to have it all, but in the end readers can deduce why she doesn't like Merci. Using evidence from the book, explain why you believe that Edna bullies Merci.
15. Lolo's diagnosis is hard for Merci and Lolo, and it affects the entire family. Have students discuss how life will change for Merci's family in the future.
16. How does the author's choice of writing the story from a first-person point of view affect our knowledge of the story and Merci? If it had been written in third person, limited or omniscient, how would the story have been different?

## Classroom Activities

Use these activities to extend your students' experience with *Merci Suárez Changes Gears*.

### COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

These classroom extensions correlate to ELA Reading Standards for Literature: Key Ideas and Details RL.4-7.1, RL.4-7.3; Craft and Structure RL.4-7.4, RL.4-7.5, RL.4-7.6; Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity RL.4-7.10; ELA Writing Standards: Research to Build and Present Knowledge W.4-7.7, W.4-7.8, W.4-7.9; and ELA Standards for History/Social Studies: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RH.6-8.7.

### Spanish

Merci and her family are bilingual, and Meg Medina included Spanish throughout the book to show this aspect of the characters' lives. Using think-pair-share, have students reflect on, discuss, and share their thoughts about what the inclusion of Spanish brings to the story. Make sure they include examples to support their answers. If your students don't know Spanish, don't worry! Context allows readers to determine the meaning, or they can use a translation dictionary. As they read the book, have students keep a list of the Spanish words they think are most important to the meaning of the story. When they finish the book, they can create a glossary of the words. They can also make flash cards to learn all the words Merci uses in Spanish!

### Family

Merci's family is an essential part of her story. They are close-knit and love one another, and they even live in adjoining homes. But every family is a little different. Explore families with your class.

### ■ Traditions

We learn about several of Merci's family traditions throughout the book (such as on pages 141-142, 309, and 347). Have students write about their own family traditions. Then create an "Our Family Traditions" album to share them in your classroom.

### ■ Ancestry

Lolo came to the United States from Cuba. Do your students know where their families emigrated to the United States from? Have your students interview their families, if they can, to get this information. Then set up a world map for them to mark the locations to show the diversity of your students' ancestry.

*Please note that for some students this may be a sensitive subject, so please use judgment when deciding to have your class take part in this activity.*

## Alzheimer's Disease

Merci's grandfather Lolo has Alzheimer's disease. Roli explains the disease to Merci on pages 266–267, but not all of her questions and his answers are elaborated in the text. Use these activities to learn more about the condition.

*Please note that for some students this may be a sensitive subject, so please use judgment when deciding to have your class take part in these activities.*

### ■ Research Project

Break the class into four groups and assign the following topics: Symptoms of Alzheimer's, Changes in the Brain, Plaques and Tangles, and Stages of Alzheimer's. (Optional additional topics include Diagnosis of Alzheimer's and Treatment of Alzheimer's.) Each group should research their assigned topic and create a presentation to share with the class about what they learn. Depending on your students' ages, you may want to provide resources. Some reputable resources are:

[www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/what-is-alzheimers](http://www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/what-is-alzheimers)

[www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers-disease-fact-sheet](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers-disease-fact-sheet)

[www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/alzheimers-disease/symptoms-causes/syc-20350447](http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/alzheimers-disease/symptoms-causes/syc-20350447)

### ■ Context Clues

Even without the words *Alzheimer's* or *dementia* being mentioned, there are signs starting early in the book that Lolo is struggling with a neurological disorder. Have students create a list of signs they noticed throughout the book that Lolo was suffering from dementia.

## Art

### ■ What Is an Artist?

Merci is artistic like Abuela. Some people may not think of a seamstress as an artist, but after reading about Abuela's creations, it is obvious that she is. As a class, define the term *artist*. Then divide the students into five groups. Give each group a character: Papa, Lolo, Abuela, Merci, or Lena. Have them explain how their character fits the class's definition of an artist, using specific examples from the book to back up their answer.

### ■ Portrait Albums

For Lolo's Nochebuena gift, Merci creates a book of family portraits showing her family doing everyday activities that epitomize them, such as the twins sword fighting, Roli reading a book, and Abuela at her sewing machine. Have students make a list of their family and friends. Over a week or so, they should take a photograph of each person that showcases their personality. They can then compile the images into an album, explaining under each picture how the portrait captures the person.

## Figurative Language

Merci has an artist's eye, so when describing an object, feeling, place, or person, she often uses literary devices such as imagery or figurative language. If these concepts are new to your students, define and discuss imagery and figurative language. Then share some examples from the first half of the book, such as:

### Simile

“. . . past the boys' locker room, which smells like bleach and dirty socks.” (page 5)

“To me, it looked like they were sucking each other's faces off, like in a sci-fi movie.” (page 60)

“The corners are tucked in tight like a paper football. . . .” (page 120)

### Imagery

“. . . we're all snorting and giggling the way you do after surviving an especially scary roller-coaster ride.” (page 7)

“I feel my cheeks turn the color of my blazer.” (page 19)

“The midday sun feels bright enough to melt my eyes. . . .” (page 67)

### Personification

“The flower stench socks me in the nose so hard that I start breathing through my mouth.” (page 37)

“There's space to the left of the keeper, calling my name.” (pages 92–93)

### Onomatopoeia

“. . . sanding off the chipped paint on the door—*cha-cha-cha-cha*—trying to smooth it down.” (page 141)

Literal	Figurative

Using these examples, have your students create a picture of what Merci is describing. Remind them to make sure to pay attention to the descriptive language she uses. For personification and simile, students could also draw a figurative and literal interpretation of what Merci stated.

After this introduction to figurative language and imagery using the first half of the book, have your students search for examples in the second half of the book. Hang poster paper around the room labeled *Simile*, *Imagery*, *Personification*, and *Onomatopoeia*, and maybe

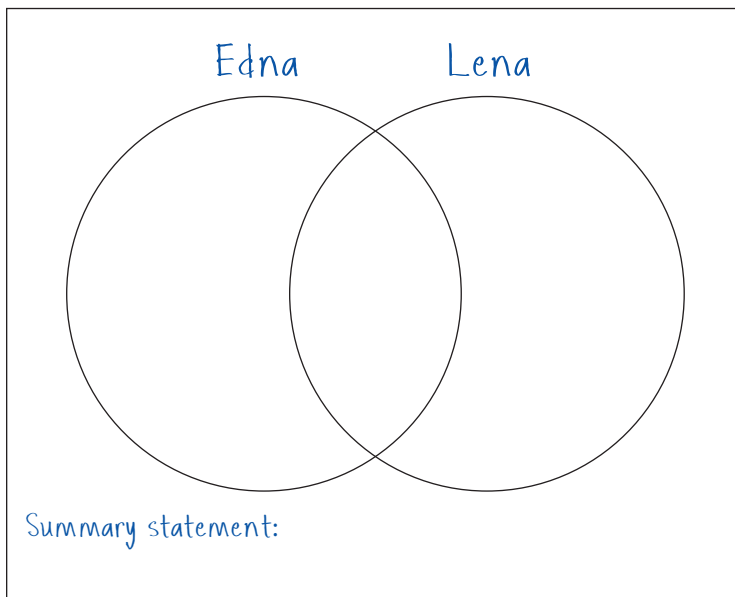
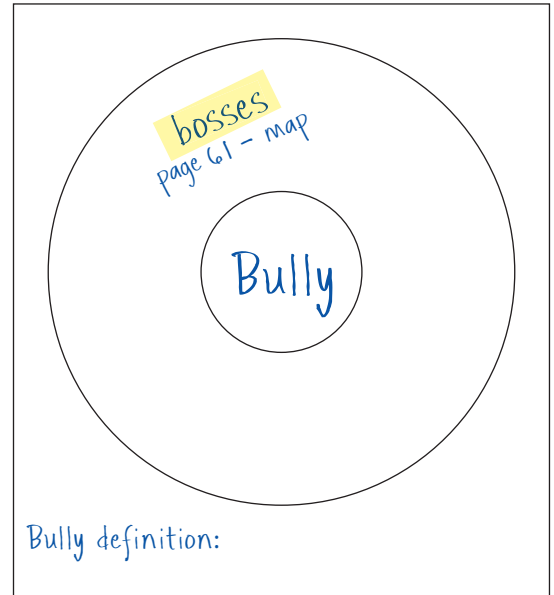
hang some extras in case a different type of figurative language is found. Divide students into small groups to go over the phrases they found, discuss which category they fit into, then write the phrases onto the corresponding poster paper. Remind them to include the page number where they found each example. When all the groups are done, students can take part in a gallery walk with their book to view all the different examples. When the gallery walk is completed, ask students: How did the author's inclusion of figurative language and imagery in the book transform the narrative, specifically when it comes to meaning and tone?

## Bullying & Friendship

As a class, brainstorm in a circle map what a bully is. Then create a class definition of a bully.

Have students think about Edna specifically. Ask students if any components of Edna's behavior fit your class definition of what a bully is. When students share answers, have them be specific about where in the story their inference is supported. Highlight on the brainstorming map which aspects Edna fits and make notes of the examples from the book.

Then, looking at the brainstorming map and definition, have your students answer: Is Edna a bully?



Other discussion topics for this activity:

How is Edna different from what is typically seen as a bully? What are some of her positive qualities? If she is a bully, why is she popular?

What is the difference between being mean, like the boys stealing food during lunch, and being a bully?

Introduce your students to the idea of passive-aggressiveness and ask them to think about how Edna uses passive-aggressive comments to belittle Merci (find examples on pages 13, 35, 39, and 43).

In the first half of the book, Merci tries to make Edna work as a friend. Then she meets Lena. Have your students compare and contrast Edna and Lena and then summarize how these two characters differ. What makes Lena a better friend than Edna?

## Ancient Egypt

Ms. Tannenbaum's activities with Merci's class are a good way to tie ancient Egyptian geography, culture, history, and mythology into classroom learning. Have your students recreate the activities that Merci takes part in:

Great Tomb Project (pages 58, 298–305, and 335–338)

Relief map creation (pages 57, 61–62)

Hieroglyphics writing and translation (pages 189–190)

Mythology costume and write-up (pages 215 and 253–256)

### Common Core Connections

The Common Core Standards push readers to look closer when reading a text, examining the author's craft and analyzing word choice and narrative elements. Meg Medina's novel *Merci Suárez Changes Gears* includes intricate themes, complex characters, specific word choices, and a well-crafted plot that allow readers to delve deeply into the text. This teachers' guide includes discussion questions and language arts activities to be used in grades 4–7 in conjunction with reading the book as a whole group, small group, or combination. This guide could also be modified for use with a student who is reading the novel independently.

Notes throughout the guide correlate the questions and activities with specific Common Core Language Arts Standards. For more information on specific standards for your grade level, visit the Common Core website at [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

This guide was created by Kellee Moye, a middle-school reading coach and teacher from Orlando, Florida. Kellee is the coauthor of the blog *Unleashing Readers*, an author of various teaching guides, a member of the 2016–2018 ALAN Board of Directors, a member of NCTE, ALAN, and ALA, the chair of the 2014 Amelia Elizabeth Walden Book Award committee, and her school's 2017–18 Teacher of the Year.



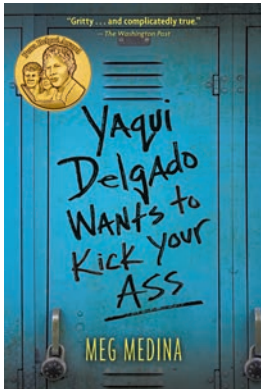
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## About the Author

**Meg Medina** is the author of the Newbery Medal winner *Merci Suárez Changes Gears*, which was also a Kirkus Prize finalist and a Charlotte Huck Award Honor Book. Her young adult novels include *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, for which she won a Pura Belpré Author Award; *Burn Baby Burn*, which was long-listed for the National Book Award; and *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind*. She is also the author of the picture books *Mango*, *Abuela*, and *Me*, illustrated by Angela Dominguez, which was a Pura Belpré Author Award Honor Book, and *Tía Isa Wants a Car*, illustrated by Claudio Muñoz, for which she won an Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award. The daughter of Cuban immigrants, Meg Medina grew up in Queens, New York, and now lives in Richmond, Virginia.

## For Slightly Older Readers



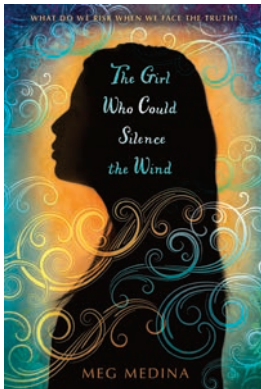
### *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*

PB: 978-0-7636-7164-8 • Age 14 and up • Also available as an e-book and in audio  
 Also available in Spanish: *Yaqui Delgado quiere darte una paliza*  
 HC: 978-0-7636-8992-6 • PB: 978-0-7636-7940-8

Winner of the  
 2014 Pura Belpré  
 Author Award

Piddy Sanchez, a Latina teen, is targeted by a bully at her new school—and must discover resources she never knew she had.

- ★ “Piddy’s ordeal feels 100-percent authentic; there are no easy outs, no simple solutions.”  
 —Kirkus Reviews (starred review)
- ★ “The message here is that tough and unfair stuff is really tough and unfair, but it’s also survivable; that’s a takeaway that readers will recognize as both true and valuable.”  
 —Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books (starred review)



### *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind*

HC: 978-0-7636-4602-8 • PB: 978-0-7636-6419-0 • Age 14 and up • Also available as an e-book and in audio

Sonia’s entire village believes she has a gift, but it’s only in leaving home that she finds out who she truly is.

“Medina creates a compelling narrative within a Latin American culture where parents cling to old ways and their children thread their paths between hope and despair, trying to find a viable future. Though touches of magical realism appear in the novel, the real magic here arises from the story of a girl struggling to see beyond others’ perceptions and find her own way in a society that seems to offer few options.” —Booklist



### *Burn Baby Burn*

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While violence runs rampant throughout New York, a teenage girl also faces danger within her own home in this riveting coming-of-age novel.

- ★ “Powerfully moving, this stellar piece of historical fiction emphasizes the timeless concerns of family loyalty and personal strength, while highlighting important issues that still resonate today.”  
 —Booklist (starred review)
- ★ “Medina is on point with the teen voices, evoking their intense fear, panic, and dreams.”  
 —School Library Journal (starred review)