

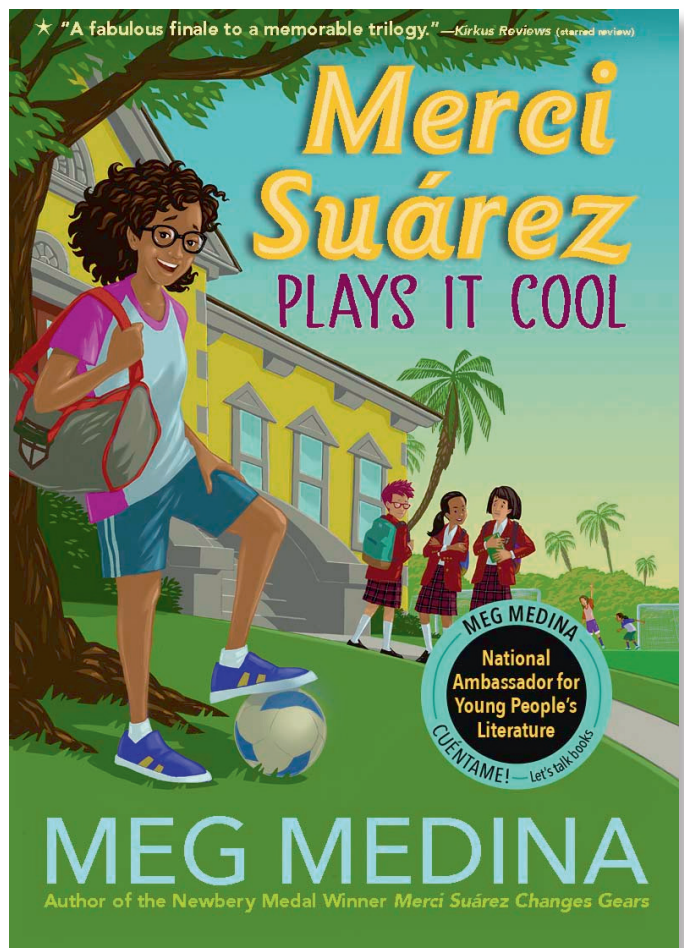
Merci Suárez

PLAYS IT COOL

MEG MEDINA

ABOUT THE BOOK

For Merci Suárez, eighth grade means a new haircut, nighttime football games, and an out-of-town overnight field trip. At home, it means more chores and keeping an eye on Lolo as his health worsens. It's a year filled with more responsibility and independence, but also with opportunities to reinvent herself. Merci has always been fine with not being one of the popular kids like Avery Sanders, who will probably be the soccer captain and is always traveling to fun places and buying new clothes. But then Avery starts talking to Merci more, and not just as a teammate. Does this mean they're friends? Merci wants to play it cool, but with Edna always in her business, it's only a matter of time before Merci has to decide where her loyalty stands. Whether Merci is facing school drama or changing family dynamics, readers will empathize as she discovers who she can count on—and what can change in an instant—in Meg Medina's heartfelt conclusion to the trilogy that began with the Newbery Medal-winning novel.



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Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used for reading check-ins or writing prompts for independent work.



1. Family is a huge part of Merci's life. How does the change in family dynamics throughout the book affect her? Consider how different family members grow and how relations from different generations learn forgiveness.
2. Meg Medina is very specific in her word choice throughout the book. What is a sentence in the book that you felt was crafted especially well? What word or words in the sentence stood out to you? Why?
3. Merci is against summer reading. She asks, "Is summer reading even legal to assign during an official vacation period?" (page 4). However, summer reading is proven to have a positive effect on students' reading level. What are your thoughts on summer reading? How do they compare with Merci's? Her family's?
4. On page 54, Roli downloads the audiobooks of Merci's summer reading texts, and Merci asks, "Is this allowed?" Listening to audiobooks has been found to have the same benefits as reading when it comes to comprehension and analysis. Do you believe that listening to audiobooks counts as reading and should be allowed for school assignments? Why or why not?
5. When Mrs. Ransome is told Roli is going to school to be a doctor (pages 60–61), her reaction is one of surprise. Why is Merci so offended by her reaction? What does the reaction tell us about preconceived notions and societal racism?
6. When Lolo runs away from the house, Papi's first reaction, after he is found, is to be angry (pages 68–69). Why do you think Papi reacts this way? What is Roli's reaction? Compare the two responses and discuss whether one is the better choice for the situation.
7. How does Merci compare boa constrictors shedding to eighth-graders (page 92)? Do you agree with the comparison? What other animals could eighth-graders be compared to?
8. Merci's favorite time of day is the early evening because the sky changes colors and the air feels cooler (page 125). What is your favorite time of day? Why? When do you think the sky looks the prettiest? How would you describe it?
9. Merci allows Avery to copy her work (page 148). What do you think Merci should have done?
10. Robin asks Coach, "What qualities are you looking for in recruits?" (page 193). What type of person do you think makes a good team player? If you were a coach, what sort of players would you be looking for?
11. There are concerns that football puts players at risk of concussions and long-term brain injuries. Mami shares this concern with Merci (pages 197–198). Do you think that only touch football should be allowed for kids? Why or why not?
12. Guidance and guidance groups play a large part in Merci's story. How can a guidance counselor session or a group session help someone who is going through a crisis?



13. Why do you think it is hard for Merci to open up to the guidance counselor? Do you think the connection she makes is ultimately helpful? Who are some of the trusted people you could go to if you felt overwhelmed and needed help?
14. Robin's turn during the soccer clinic is intense—she shows off her skills but is also challenged by the older players (pages 255–256). What does her time on the field tell you about her as a player? What does Merci's response to Robin tell you about Merci as a player and a person? Why do you think Avery is so threatened by Robin?
15. Marco is working on being part of the twins' lives; however, he isn't very consistent. How is this a positive and a negative thing for the twins, Tía, and their family?
16. Although South Florida, where Merci is from, and North Florida, where St. Augustine is, are in the same state, the geography, ecosystems, and biomes are quite different. What differences do you notice between Merci's home and St. Augustine based on what she shares on page 272? Think about your own home—how is where you live different from somewhere four hours away? Is it very different or very similar? How so?
17. How would you respond to Lena's question, "Would you rather be with a group or all alone?" (page 282)?
18. Grief is an all-encompassing emotion. How does it affect Merci? Why is the idea of a way forward (page 307) so devastating for Merci?
19. What does Mrs. Wilkinson mean when she says, "True friends feed us in lots of ways" (page 310)?
20. "Time is very strange when someone dies. It drags its feet when you don't want it to, but then you realize that weeks have gone by" (page 338). What are other examples of time being strange?
21. Merci is chosen as the soccer team captain over Avery, though Avery is a leader in other aspects, so this shows that leadership is different depending on the situation. Why do you think Merci is chosen to be team captain? What qualities does Merci have that would make her a good leader for her soccer team? What qualities is Avery missing? Where is Avery a leader, and what makes her shine there?
22. Merci learns who her true friends are throughout *Merci Suárez Plays It Cool*. What are the best qualities of a true friend? Do all friends have to be close friends? What is the difference between close friends and acquaintances?
23. Meg Medina touches on many different topics within *Merci Suárez Plays It Cool*. What is one of Merci's experiences that made you think about your own life with friends or family?

BONUS CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Mrs. Wilkinson plays a word association game during grief group:

“She pulls out a bag of Scrabble tiles and tells us that we are going to make words with them but not using the board and not counting points the way you do in the board game. She’ll give us a topic and we’ll try to make words that go with that topic. We can connect them, if we want to, but we don’t have to. She doesn’t care if the word is spelled right, either” (page 324).

Have students play the word association game just like Mrs. Wilkinson has the group play. Then expand the idea, giving different words to associate with that relate to the book, including character names, topics, themes, and so on.

Merci Suárez Plays It Cool is the final book in the trilogy, and readers have now journeyed through three years with Merci. For students who have read all three books, have them consider: How has Merci changed from the first to the last book? How has she remained the same? How has her life changed? What has remained constant for her? How else can the three novels be compared?



PHOTO BY SCOTT ELMQUIST

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MEG MEDINA, the 2023–2024 National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, is a Cuban American author who writes for readers of all ages. Her middle-grade novel *Merci Suárez Changes Gears* received a Newbery Medal and was a *New York Times Book Review* Notable Children’s Book of the Year, among many other distinctions. Its sequel, *Merci Suárez Can’t Dance*, received five starred reviews, while *Merci Suárez Plays It Cool* received four stars, with *Kirkus Reviews* calling it “a fabulous finale to a memorable trilogy.” Her most recent picture book, *Evelyn Del Rey Is Moving Away*, received honors including a Charlotte Zolotow Award and was the 2020 Jumpstart Read for the Record selection, reaching 2.24 million readers. She received a Pura Belpré Author Award Honor for her picture book *Mango, Abuela, and Me*. Her young adult novel *Burn Baby Burn* earned numerous distinctions, including being long-listed for the National Book Award and short-listed for the Kirkus Prize. Meg Medina received a Pura Belpré Author Award and a Cybils Award for her young adult novel *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, which has been adapted and illustrated as a graphic novel by Mel Valentine Vargas. She also received an Ezra Jack Keats Writer Award for her picture book *Tía Isa Wants a Car*. When she is not writing, Meg Medina works on community projects that support girls, Latino youth, and literacy. She lives with her family in Richmond, Virginia.

This discussion guide was prepared by Kellee Moye, a middle school teacher-librarian; the author of various teaching guides for all levels; the co-creator of the blog *Unleashing Readers*; a past committee member and chair of both the Schneider Family Book Award and the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award; a past member of the ALAN board of directors; and a member of NCTE, ALAN, and ALA.